

BLACK PHASE: A NOVEL OF ALASKAN ALCHEMY

By

Addley C. Fannin, B.A.

A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

Northern Studies

University of Alaska Fairbanks

December 2016

APPROVED:

Sine Anahita, Committee Co-Chair
Gerri Brightwell, Committee Co-Chair
James Ruppert, Committee Member
Mary F. Ehrlander, Director
*Department of Arctic and Northern
Studies*

ABSTRACT

Black Phase is a speculative fiction novel for a young adult audience, set in and around a fictional boarding school in modern-day southeast Alaska. Our protagonist is Mara Edenshaw, an ambitious young artist of Tlingit descent who survives a mysterious illness only to find herself the primary suspect in a string of bizarre vandalisms. Her search to clear her name leads her to Alvis Norling, a shy alchemist's apprentice living on a nearby island with only his own creation for company: a doll-sized homunculus made from a combination his and Mara's DNA.

Thus Mara's illness and the vandalisms proved to be linked and, as more clues arise connecting these events to the "sacred science" of alchemy, she and Alvis must work together to uncover the truth, which is intimately tied to the boarding school's history as an assimilation tool under the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the secret atrocities that happened there in the name of science.

Rooted in northern history, Alaska Native culture, traditional folklore and the lives of modern teens in the Last Frontier, *Black Phase* is appropriate for readers ages thirteen and up.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Black Phase is a work of fiction, but the atrocities committed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs' boarding school assimilation program were unfortunately very real. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, entire generations of Native American and Alaska Native children were removed from their parents, often by force, and made to attend boarding schools designed to "civilize" them through the destruction of the cultural identities. Children at these schools were harshly punished for speaking their native languages, forced to change their appearances, subjected to hard labor, and immersed in European-American culture in an active attempt to – as Captain Richard H. Pratt infamously said – "kill the Indian and save the man." Later investigations also revealed extensive cases of sexual, physical, and mental abuse throughout these schools, some of which was federally sanctioned. Alaska Native schools in particular were occasionally subjected to government science experiments, such as exposure to the radioactive isotope iodine-131. These abuses and the associated attempts at complete cultural annihilation continue to reverberate through the Native people to this day.

The modern-day boarding school featured in this novel is not one of those schools; it's modeled on the real-life Mount Edgecumbe boarding school in Sitka. However, like MEH, Mount Vilna High has the BIA influence as part of its history, and the intergenerational trauma of the assimilation efforts has a distinct impact on its rural-born, mostly Native student population. The abuse of power, unethical experiments, and mistreatment of the student body that form the long-distant backstory of this adventure are fictional, fantastical exaggerations loosely drawn historical reality.

In early drafts, *Black Phase* acknowledged this history directly, in part through a personal account from one of the now-grown students of the former school. However, as a white author, I

soon came to feel that this was inappropriate. This is not my history, my culture, or my trauma, and thus I do not feel comfortable putting words in the mouths of the people to whom it rightfully belongs. It is, quite simply, not my story to tell.

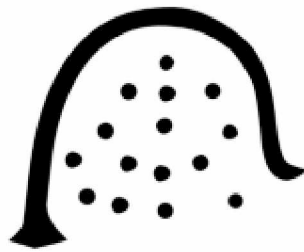
The historical influence remains in passing acknowledgements, fantastic metaphor and subtext. It is my belief that critical readers – yes, even teenage ones – should, would proper experience and direction, be able to draw parallels to the real-world events that inspired these elements. With any luck, they may even be inspired to pursue further research and seek out the first-hand accounts written by those to whom the story truly belongs.

BLACK PHASE

A Novel of Alaskan Alchemy

By Addley C. Fannin

PART ONE



CHAPTER ONE

Sickbay smelled of vomit and antibacterials. Always.

Mara scowled, holding the thermometer in her teeth so she could breathe around it. She ought to be used to this after two weeks, but the stench always seemed worse in exam rooms than in the main ward.

The school nurse, Mrs. Elsa, didn't seem to notice. She sat by on her stool, calmly transcribing notes into Mara's file with her eyes nearly hidden in the folds of age. The watch at her wrist ticked on, counting seconds and heartbeats in equal measure. It was maddening.

Finally, *finally*, the thermometer beeped. Mrs. Elsa plucked it from Mara's lips and held it to the fluorescent light as she adjusted her reading glasses. She smiled. "Ninety-eight point two. You're in the clear."

"Yes!"

Mara leapt from the exam table, the heels of her boots squeaking against the tiled floor. She grabbed for her coat -- denim and warm, covered in homemade formline-style patches held on by rattling safety pins - but Mrs. Elsa caught her arm before she could bolt for the door.

"Hold on," she said gently, drawing Mara back to her stool. "We need to be sure. Lift your head."

Groaning, Mara did as she'd been told and allowed the elder to press driftwood fingers into her throat. Mrs. Elsa smiled, her gaze flickering between eye contact and the once-tender glands beneath her nails.

"Have you caught up with your classes?"

Mara shrugged, tallying assignments in her mind. Perhaps she'd skimped a bit on the math, but who cared? Pre-cal didn't matter in the long run. Not where she planned to go.

"Ms. Applegate came by this morning. She seemed concerned about your latest sketches."

Mara's hand twitched. "What about them?"

"She says your style's changed. You worked in formline before, but not now." Mrs. Elsa settled back, drew the stethoscope from around her neck, and slipped its cold tip under Mara's shirt. "I remember your paintings from last year. Such a natural style, in the old craft. It would be a shame to lose that."

"I'm not." Mara stared at her feet. The urge to go bursting into the world like a firecracker had dulled, leaving only a calm yet anxious quiet. Perhaps that's what Mrs. Elsa had wanted all along. "I'm experimenting, that's all."

The nurse hummed, removing her stethoscope and setting it aside. "Well, you're symptom free. Should be safe to return you to the herd."

Mara sighed in relief, hoisting on the familiar soft coat to cover her t-shirt and bare arms. Mrs. Elsa turned back to the file. Her bowed, ancient frame reminded Mara of her grandmother, crouched beside a roaring fire.

"Solomon asked to see you off. Be sure to wait for him."

"Yes ma'am."

Mara paused at the exam room door. She considered her impulse for a moment, then turned back. "Atigtalik?"

Mrs. Elsa stilled, her pen hovering off the page. Atigtalik was her Inupiat name, the one that belonged to her mother's grandmother and her great-grandmother before that, the one that had been passed down through family lines long before white missionaries gave them new names. She'd offered it to Mara and her fellow Native boarders in their first week, to mitigate homesickness. In the two years since, Mara had used it only this once.

She turned back, granting Mara another of those warm smiles. "Yes, dear?"

"Gunalachéesh."

The smile widened. Mrs. Elsa didn't speak Lingit -- there weren't many left who could, even among Mara's people -- but twenty years of tending to the Bush-born boarders of every tribe and clan in the state left the old Inuk with enough to get the gist.

"Ilaali," she said, in her own language. *You're welcome.* "Now go on. Don't let me see you back here again."

###

Mount Vilna High School hadn't always been a high school. It hadn't always been a school. In its first life, during the Second World War, it'd been a military base: a northern outpost of U.S. Navy, ready to defend the Alaskan islands against invasion by the Japanese.

Nowhere was this more obvious than in Sickbay, which hadn't seen a renovation in seventy-two years. It had cement floors and cinder block walls and exposed iron beams tarnished with rust. A dozen tiny windows -- welded shut and set high out of patients' reach -- let in the slightest light along the two long sides of the rectangular bunker that formed the main ward. Faded curtained dividers offered the illusion of privacy between wheeled metal beds.

For two weeks, Mara had lived in the corner farthest from the front doors, unable to move from her bed for risk of infecting the school with an unknown plague. Finally free, she wasted no time. Pajamas and clothes went from a steamer trunk into her duffle bag, with get-well cards and a deflated balloon tucked alongside. The books on her nightstand went into her backpack. The textbooks were rentals, the novels from the library, and the few books that weren't either were still precious to her even though she no longer had to wait two months for a new delivery like she would back home.

At the very bottom lay her sketchbook, recently returned from Ms. Applegate's weekly review. Mara kept it out, reminding herself that an artist must review their own work if they want to improve. She sat on the bed, balanced the heavy black hard-cover against one knee, and opened to the first page.

A pair of birds stared up at her, turned in profile so that each peered with a single blue-rimmed eye. They faced one another, beaks raised and wings reaching, alike in symmetry though anyone who looked would see the differences in their beaks, feathers, patterns, and feet.

It was a copy, a mimic of the tall carvings that decorated the community meeting house in Keijin, her home village. Her uncle the artist made her take the sketch before coming to school. Its original predated them both by generations, and he said they both could stand to learn from the old masters.

The pages that followed held more of the same: formline salmon, formline bear, formline dog, formline man. Some she'd sketched in pencil, leaving the guidelines and smudges that came from tracing paper. Others were finished, their shapes lined in black and filled with red or blue. All matched tradition to T, until about thirty pages when she'd started branching out. Here was a snake in highlighter green, there an attempt at a landscape in ovoids and curves. She'd tried designs of foreign animals, re-imaginings of popular brand logos, and even a formline self-portrait, complete with her too-sharp jaw and the asymmetric green bangs above her left eye.

In the middle of the book lay a blank page, stained only with smudges of graphite.

Mara ran her fingers down it, unable to shake the heavy, damp sense of *wrong*. She'd never before seen a blank page that she hadn't want to cover in art. But when she got sick, the habit of drawing a picture every day fell to the wayside. It hadn't felt right to pick it up again as though there were nothing wrong.

What came after that...well. Looking at it now, she understood Mrs. Applegate's concern.

Instead of neat, symmetrical formline, her new pages were filled to the margins in cluttered ballpoint. Circles and arrows, swirls and lines, all the clutters of shapes and angles were too purposeful to be random, and yet she barely remembered drawing any of them, let alone what they could mean. These were things she'd drawn in a dream, or in the haze of fevers that left her barely aware. Some resembled letters; others, alien hieroglyphics. On one page, tendrils crept from an upper corner. She thought it might be smoke. Or maybe an octopus?

No good. In the light of day, she could no more recall what it was supposed to be than she could the dream that inspired it.

The only thing familiar was the sketch on the final page of an island covered from shore to shore with evergreens. A bridge stretched from its shore into a lower corner and, scratched

high above in place of the sun, there hung another symbol: a circle crossed through with an 'X' that had extra bars on each arm, like the sphere were being stabbed by four swords at the same time.



The sigil meant nothing, but Mara knew this island. She'd dreamed of it for weeks, saw it every time she closed her eyes.

A closing door brought her out of her thoughts and back into the real world. Mr. Petrov, her history teacher, had entered through the double front doors and was making his way towards her. Mara stuffed her sketchbook into her bag.

Mr. Solomon Petrov was Mrs. Elsa's husband, a tall white man of about sixty whose age seemed to have shrunk him in his own skin. He wore glasses and cuff links and kept his long, silver-gray hair in a neat ponytail.

Head of the history department, he also happened to be Mara's adviser, which meant the he was the closest thing she had to a parent while at school. He took the job a bit too seriously. The fatherly concern he exuded made Mara cringe.

"How are you feeling?" he asked as he reached the end of her bed. He muted his strong voice while in Sickbay, though there was no one left here to disturb.

Mara shrugged, digging the last of her things from the side-table. "All right."

Wrong answer. Petrov thinned his lips and fixed her with a pale gray stare.

She tried again. "I feel better."

Still not the whole truth. Petrov quirked an eyebrow. Mara sighed.

"If I don't leave now, I'll scream."

That finally drew a soft laugh. "Understandable."

He kept a respectable distance, hovering beside the curtains as she finished collecting her things. Then he cleared his throat. "Tamara..."

"Mara." Mr. Petrov was better than some teachers about not using her full name, but sometimes he slipped.

"Mara," he corrected, inclining his head in silent apology. "I know you're tired of hearing this, but I need to ask you one last time."

Mara cringed. She'd been expecting this, but it didn't make things any easier.

"Are you sure you don't remember what happened?"

Mara zipped up her bag, focusing on its teeth so she wouldn't have to make eye contact.

She'd tried to remember. Two weeks ago, on Sunday afternoon, she'd left campus for the local bike trails as she had a hundred times before. Hours later, she'd turned up unconscious on the campus green. She remembered signing out at the dorm, remembered unlocking her bike and setting off on her usual route, and she remembered the familiar path through the dense trees that crowded their shores, and after that...

Nothing. After that, she had only her sketches and dreams.

She shook her head, both to answer his question and to clear the thought from her mind.

"You're sure?" He regarded her carefully. Mara knew that there were people on campus who didn't believe her, mostly students, but also some faculty. Despite her friends' best efforts, she'd caught wind of the rumor that she'd gotten alcohol poisoning -- and if she ever found out who started that, she'd wring their neck.

But Mrs. Elsa believed her, which meant Petrov would too. "That's too bad," he said, shaking his head. "But I suppose it can't be helped. You'll need take it easy for the next few days."

"Yes, sir." Sensing that their conversation was over at last, Mara shouldered her backpack and rose from the bed.

"I'm sure Silena will be glad to have you back."

Mara snorted. Silena Smoke was her roommate, an Athabascan girl from the Interior who spent nearly all her free time in their dorm. They didn't get along. "Anything else?"

"I suppose not."

He paused, studying her face as though he expected to find answers. Then he patted her lightly on the shoulder.

"Take care of yourself, Mara. I'll see you in class."

Mara watched him go, a nagging instinct insisting that he'd he wanted to say more. She could hear the waves in his footsteps, the pulsing beat of a tide against the shore, the rush of hot water through the thick concrete walls...

She shook herself. She'd been in here too long. Hoisting her duffle bag off the ground, she made a beeline for the sickbay doors.

#

Outside was brighter than she remembered. Mara squinted against the blazing sun as she stepped onto the concrete steps. Her first deep breath cleansed the vomit-scent from her lungs and refilled them with a mix of icy brine and sweet spruce. Her ears swelled with the sound of creaking boats, water lapping the shore, and wind rustling ravens from the nearby trees. It seemed almost like home.

Mount Vilna High took up the entire southern tip of Metharme, the smaller of two heavily-wooded islands that made up the city of Latea. Latea was a city by Alaskan standards only; anywhere else, it'd have been a small town with only a few thousand residents and a steady influx of summer tourists. Most people lived on the main island's coast, which Mara could just see through the fishing boats that crowded the harbor. A bridge to the north connected it to Metharme, which contained only a few secluded homes and the school itself.

Sickbay stood near the center of the MVH, right at the edge of the campus green. North, to Mara's right, led to the most of the main buildings, including classrooms, dorms, and the main gates. South, to Mara's left, eventually led to the refurbished airplane hanger that served as the gym. Dead ahead lay the mess hall, with the school's namesake -- the long-dormant Mount Vilna volcano -- looming in the distance.

Mara took it all in, swelling with the raw joy of actually seeing the place anew rather than waking up in Keijin, when someone to the north called her name. Caden, her best friend, came running up the campus green, all black feather hair and twiggy limbs, his IHS-issue with coke-bottle glasses making his eyes look huge.

"You're out."

"Sure am. For good this time." Mara slipped her phone from her pocket and checked the time. It was quarter-one. Class wouldn't be out for another hour. "What are you doing here?"

"Atigtalik called me out. Here, let me take that."

He reached for her bag. Mara tugged away and turned her shoulder to block his next attempt. "I can handle it."

That should have been the end of it, but then he tried to take her arm and guide her down the steps like some knob-kneed old lady. Mara jerked from his grip, took the steps in two bounds and whirled to face him.

"Stop it. I don't need a babysitter."

So she'd been out of commission for two weeks. Yeah, it had been nice to have friends come visit. She'd seen a bunch of girls from the dorms, her fellow Traditional Art club members and even Cay's roommate Syd, who was a pretty nice guy. But Caden came every. Single. Day. Even when she'd been out cold, he'd waited out her preliminary quarantine on these very same steps. And when he finally saw her, he'd tried to do everything for her, from fetching water to reading. It was too much.

She stared him down, feet planted and arms crossed. Caden kept his face a blank mask, but betrayed his emotions by breaking the gaze first. He mumbled.

"Speak up."

"... You scared me."

That gave Mara pause; not the words, but the tremble his voice barely hid. What must it have been like, watching her illness from the outside? Did it remind him of the patients who crowded his uncle's home in bad winters? Of the funerals, led by his father and surrounded by the village they'd known their entire lives? Did he try to plan how he'd explain it to her parents when he had to tell them that they'd lost another first born?

Her throat tightened. Stupid. It hadn't happened. But if their situations were reversed and it had been Caden lying sick...

She sighed, slung the duffle bag from her shoulder, and tossed it to him. He didn't gloat, just tucked it under his arm and fell into step beside her, herding her back to the girls' dorms.

They made their way to the girls' dorm, which stood silent with nearly everyone in class. Mara's room was on the fourth floor, facing north. It seemed cleaner than she remembered. Silena's doing.

Mara held the door, allowing Caden to drag the heavy duffle in first. Once it'd been delivered, he stood beside her bed and fiddled with his glasses. Rules said, no boys in the girls' rooms unless they signed in and kept the door open. Mara let the door swing closed and caught his hand.

"You worry too much, ax já."

The old nickname at last drew the smallest smile. It meant "my sweetheart," a long-time joke they'd shared ever since they'd first noticed their parents' non-too-subtle attempts at grade-school matchmaking. She hoped that now he understood what she meant -- she was still herself. Things between them had not changed.

Sinking onto her bed, Caden held Mara's hand in both of his own and traced the shape with his fingers. Mara sat beside him and said nothing, letting the familiar stories of scars and life-lines bring him comfort. He seemed nearly sated before his brow furrowed, thick eyebrows coming together the way they always did when he frowned.

"What's this?" he asked, three fingers pressed to the heart of her palm.

"What's what?"

Mara cocked her head, allowing him to turn her hand so the wrist lay almost flat. His fingers slid away, revealing a razor-thin white line that ran from her middle finger down to the heel at her palm.

"This one's new," said Caden, his eyebrows nearly touching now. He knew Mara's hands better than she did. If he noticed, it must be true.

Mara stared at the scar, trying to recall where it came from, what it had been when it was fresh. To be so clear and so recent, it must have been deep, perhaps deep enough to need stitches. But Mrs. Elsa hadn't said a word, so where...

Blood, blood on the stone and in her eyes. Trees all around, their branches swinging, drowning the waves. A hand on her wrist, white as a pearl. Green eyes. The bridge...

Her balance swayed. Mara took a step and sank onto the bed next to Caden before she fell over. The grip on her hand became desperate.

"You okay? Need the nurse? If I run, I could fetch her before--"

"I'm fine." Mara curled her fingers around his, blocking out the new scar and squeezing perhaps a bit too hard. "No more Sickbay. I don't need it."

Caden flared his nostrils. His neck stiffened in an unconscious attempt to mimic Mara's father. For Caden, all it did was make his head shake.

"I swear, I'm okay." Mara put her chin on his shoulder and bumped her brow against his cheek. "I'm just hungry. Make food?"

Caden snorted. The tension slipped out of his neck and he acquiesced with a laugh, giving her hand a last squeeze before crossing to her closet in search of ingredients. Mara stayed on the bed, coiling her fingers around the air where his palm had been. Her fingers burned.

CHAPTER TWO

Just before sunset, the MS *Arctic Princess* pulled from Latea Harbor as the final departure of the tourist season. Half of downtown came to watch, tour guides and seasonal clerks crowding the tourist docks with long-term residents and the yearly hires. They cheered the farewell blasts from the ship's echoing horn, a final hurrah to a good year's work before the city buckled in for the winter.

Alvis watched too, from the far end of their ancient, single-moor dock. His body thrummed, aura reaching across the sea to brush the crowd's distant whisper. So many people united in singular emotion and a moment of time...the city wouldn't be this loud again until New Year's. If even then.

He lingered long as he dared, then returned to the task at hand. High tide wouldn't last forever. He knelt at the dock's edge, lowered one bucket then the other into the brine and drew them back full to the dock. He checked each for large impurities -- driftwood, sea weed, or fish -- before reluctantly turning his back on the crowd and returning to his island's safe and shadowed trees.

He'd been told before that the city's island, Latea, was simply a much larger version of where he lived and couldn't compare to the mainland beyond. That seemed hard to believe. Latea dominated the western horizon, stretching so far in either direction that he'd never seen the tips, and its mountains rose at least as high if not higher than the distant peaks that loomed to the north and south. Meanwhile, his island was no mountain. At best, it might be a hill overgrown with spruce trees and what outsiders would take to be the occasional birch. It could be crossed in twenty minutes if you knew the right path, fifteen if you were going down-hill.

It took him ten to leave the dock behind and return to the house he shared with his teacher. Their home had once been grand, but everything save the lab and greenhouses had since fallen into disrepair. They had neither the time nor the interest in maintenance; besides, his master claimed it made for perfect camouflage.

The path from the dock led Alvis to the back, where the water purification trough lay open and waiting. He hoisted a bucket to its lip -- which stood well above his shoulder -- and emptied its contents into the basin. Water gurgled down into the glass pipes that led into the lab and the athanor, which would filter out the salt and leave the water fresh as rain.

He did the same with the second bucket, his last for the day, only for his hand to lurch at the last second and send it crashing to the trough. Alvis cursed under his breath and hauled himself over the lip to fish the bucket out. It'd split on impact, leaving a long crack in the bottom. Useless.

Leaving the good bucket behind, he entered through the greenhouse. Most plants recoiled from the autumn chill. Those that couldn't lurked farther, protected by distance and heat.

A second door at the back led into the lab, the largest room in the house by far. Benches and work-tables lined the walls beneath wide windows and a network of rattling glass. The

athanor, a mighty furnace and the crucible of all Great Work, burned with dragon's fury at the room's heart. Its smoke kept them safe; it carried an incense that bent light and distracted even the local pilots who might notice them from above.

On its opposite side lurked his teacher, crouched over an operating table. He didn't look up when Alvis approached, too focused on his work. The tattered tails of his black canvas lab coat swept restless over the hardwood floor.

Alvis crept closer, holding the broken bucket to his stomach. The table held the remains of his master's last hunt: the complete bones of a lupine beast forged entirely of green copper. Its ribs were bent where his teacher had landed the killing.

"As previously noted," the man muttered in his Russian mother tongue to the cassette recorder at his side. "Despite biological remnants bearing the distinct trace of mustelidae -- thought to be wolverine -- I can find no evidence that the skeleton differs at all from the previous samples of wolves. Therefore..."

"Teacher?"

The master grunted and at last glanced up, face twisted in a near-permanent scowl. The nasty crescent-shaped scar marring the right side of his throat and jaw made it look even worse.

Alvis gulped, nearly swallowing his own tongue. He pried his hands from the broken bucket shield and pointed to the copper skull. "There's a molar here. Th-The outer edge is worn to a point, but it's not...it's rotated. Ninety degrees, so it faces the inside of the mouth." He tugged at the hard metal of the bucket's handle, struggling to recall some of the more obscure Russian terms. "That's a, um. A wolverine trait. Just the one."

His teacher regarded him, then reached for the skull to see for himself. After running his fingers along the teeth he grunted in English, "I see," and repeated the observation into his tape in Russian.

Alvis allowed himself a swell of pride. His late-night anatomy studies were paying off in more ways than one.

The master -- his given name was Darius, but Alvis rarely called him that out of respect -- wrapped up his notes with an unceremonious click and tossed a stained tarp over the remains. He scowled at Alvis as though trying to puzzle out his presence and finally settled on the bucket.

"Why bring that inside?"

"It broke." Alvis showed him the splintered base. "I dropped it. But I still got the water in."

Another grunt. His teacher rounded the table, took the bucket, and jabbed his fist at the crack. "This, we can repair." He tossed it aside and caught Alvis's arm before he could retreat. Alvis instinctively tried to pull away, which only served to draw back his sleeve and expose the bandages around his wrist.

Without breaking his grip, the master rolled their hands together and pressed his thumb against the gauze-wrapped wound. "Is this why it happened?"

Alvis wince and nodded.

"Why has it not healed?"

"I-I don't know." Alvis squirmed, though he knew he couldn't get away. "I guess it runs deeper than I thought."

"Clearly." Darius pressed deeper, then released the pressure along with his apprentice's arm. "This requires more potent treatment."

He turned, striding out of the lab with the expectation that he would be followed. Alvis cradled his wounded arm close and, wordless, obeyed.

#

From the lab, they stepped directly into the kitchen, a small room made smaller by counters, cabinets, an ancient chest freezer, and a lifetime supply of emergency rations. Boxes stuffed with freeze-dried or self-heating meals covered every available surface. The space between them contained five-pound cans of other essentials -- dehydrated milk and powdered butter, instant eggs and whole peeled tomatoes. What little space remained held stashes of month-old local papers collected from a post box in town.

Alvis, true to routine, settled in at the table alongside one-hundred-and-forty individual servings of chicken and rice. He picked at the butterfly clips until they came loose, unraveling the long layers of white gauze.

He kept one eye on his teacher, who ducked in and out of sight as he scoured the cabinets for supplies. In many ways, Darius resembled an ancient tree: stable and unyielding, gnarled from years of abuse. His left leg no longer moved as well as it should, leaving him with a limp, and his body bore dozens of scars as bad or worse as the one on his face. Gray flecks streaked his dark hair.

Once he'd fished out fresh wrappings, he returned to the table. He lingered there long enough to prickle Alvis's nerves. Alvis unwrapped faster, thinking the man wanted to see his wound. Instead, gnarled fingers raked through the boy's dishwater-blond hair.

"This is getting quite long. It will need cutting soon."

A protest bubbled up Alvis's throat. They always trimmed his hair eventually, but he didn't want to cut it yet. He thought he might actually like it long...

But that would upset his teacher, so he choked the thought down with a nod.

The last layer of gauze came away to reveal delicate pink skin of a half-healed burn. Darius scoffed at it and stomped to the nearest cabinet. Alvis skimmed the wound's tender edge with his good hand. Even with the bandage, its edge had gone crispy. He wanted to scratch it. The urge only grew worse when his teacher re-emerged holding a squat glass jar. Alvis knew that jar. He knew the translucent blue-gray poultice it contained. He'd used it himself not too long ago, without permission.

The master held the jar to the light and frowned. He removed its lid and waved the smell of it towards his squashed, square nose. It wrinkled. "This tincture..."

Alvis dug his nails into the burn.

"This is no good. It has gone sour."

With that, Darius crossed to the sink and washed the jar's contents down the drain. A similar thickness congealed on Alvis's tongue.

"Sour?" he croaked. "What do you mean, sour?"

"It has spoiled," said his master, without turning. "Gone bad. Rotten. It would be dangerous to use."

Alvis swallowed, then did it again. The thickness did not pass. "I didn't know that happened. When did it go off?"

"It has been poison for months."

Alvis's hand slipped. His nails sliced into the skin, drawing blood.

"Be careful," his master snapped, snatching another poultice from his drawer. "You're bleeding everywhere."

Alvis mumbled a quick apology and scrambled to finish treating and re-dressing the wound. His hands shook and his breath came in shallow gasps. He had to calm down, or the fear would give him away.

He was saved from his master's watch by the fortuitous arrival of a beautiful white bird. She flew through the open window, trailed her tail feathers along Alvis's shoulder, and trilled a sweet note to announce her presence before coming landing on Darius's shoulder.

Her name was Faigel, and she was as perfect and pure as her owner was broken and dark. Though she stood as tall as a raven, her body more closely resembled a dove, save for her silver beak and the tail feathers that stretched nearly as long as her body. In truth, the tincture that created her carried the essence of a dozen different species, each chosen specifically for their strength, beauty, intelligence, and long-distance flying. She was one-of-a-kind, a masterpiece, and utterly devoted to her creator.

As he scratched her under the chin, Darius's rough features softened until Alvis could almost make out the fresh-faced young man he must have once been. The master caressed Faigel's neck with his thumb before moving her to a new perch on the chicken-and-rice box, so that he might more easily retrieve the letter she wore on her leg. Its thin parchment un-spooled like a roll of film.

Darius scowled. It must be written in English.

Alvis kept quiet, not wanting to embarrass his master by showing him up at language. He re-packed the first aid supplies, then offered his newly-repaired arm to Faigel. The bird judged him with a regal blue eye before acquiescing to lower her head for a stroke.

His master's dark gaze shot to the window. He crumpled the letter and glared up at the cloudy even sky.

"What is it?" Alvis asked, rising from the table.

"New instructions." Darius snarled. Then, "I need to make a call."

Alvis lowered his head, tugging at the ring he wore around his neck while Faigel followed his teacher into the private office across the hall. As the letter landed in the waste bin, Alvis caught a glimpse of the wax seal still clinging to its edge. Though he could not see its design, he knew it must be the mark of his master's Order. Only the superiors had the mechanism to contact or be contacted by their home phone.

He listened intently until he heard his master cross the hall and slam the door to his office. Then, Alvis snatched up the newspapers and began to frantically tear through their headlines.

Two weeks ago, he'd met a girl. A lovely girl, with nut-brown eyes and skin the color of terracotta. She'd seen him. She wasn't supposed to. No one was. Their life was invisible, and that was the only thing that kept them and their secrets safe.

But Alvis had needed someone else. Without her, his work couldn't continue.

So he let himself be seen. He brought her onto the island, spoke with her, got what he needed. And then he gave her that poisoned salve.

He dug through the papers, starting with the local news, the obituaries, and the police reports. She'd left her student ID behind in the grass. He'd found it after she left, never had a chance to send it back. What was the name...?

Tamara. Tamara Edenshaw.

Each new issue went by like a flash -- the *Latea Ledger* had only local coverage, after all. He kept expecting to see her name in bold type, or find a picture of her with that short, dyed hair and brilliant smile...

But he never did.

The dates in the newspaper stack ended well before they'd ever met, leaving Alvis lost in the gap between dazed and relieved. He hadn't killed her. That had to be what this meant. Accidental poisoning or not, Tamara Edenshaw must be alive.

She had to be.

He re-stacked the papers, one ear constantly turned toward the office door. He couldn't make out his teacher's words, but he could guess what had happened: he would be called away again soon. The Order of Trismegistus kept Darius on-hand as an exterminator, a hunter of rogue constructs and other alchemical experiments gone awry. Where they pointed, he traveled. It might be days before he returned.

A familiar ache plucked at Alvis's chest. He would be left alone again, with only their artificial plants and the lights of distant Latea to keep him company. Yet, this one time, that pain also held a ripple of excitement. He would be alone. And his personal project was almost complete.

After packing the first-aid supplies back where they belonged, Alvis took his teacher's extended absence as permission to be excused and climbed the stairs to the second floor. He passed through the library -- an open balcony overlooking the large Great Room below -- and ducked into the little room he called his own. It was unfinished, with low sloped ceilings and a tiny window and barely enough room for the desk squeezed in alongside his bed; but he liked it. It was quiet here, and private. One little space all his own.

For a moment, he stayed with his back to the door and simply breathed, focusing on the flow of his aura -- his Quintessence -- just beneath the skin. If he wasn't careful, tempestuous emotions would give him away. Before anything else, he needed to calm the storm.

"This is truth without error, certain and most true..."

By the time he'd finished reciting the Emerald Tablet, he'd managed to calm his emotion from waves to a placid lake. The excitement lingered, but as an undercurrent only he could sense. As it should be.

Now relaxed and content, Alvis shed his lab coat and settled at his desk. A number of alchemy texts and his personal research notes lay open, waiting for study. He ignored them in favor of selecting a small key from the table and unlocking the bottom desk drawer.

The first thing to come out was an ancient moleskin journal, its black surface brittle and cracked with age. Its spine bore a faded gray ribbon to mark his place and its face was embossed with the alchemical glyph for winter:



The symbol which decorated the doorknobs and mantels throughout the house. Its constant presence gave the house its old name -- House Winter -- and also served as a constant reminder of its previous owner, a man named Orvar.

Alvis's father.

Alvis traced the worn, familiar glyph with his fingers. He'd found this journal, his *father's* journal, under loose floorboards in the library and had kept it close ever since. The information it contained had been invaluable to his personal Work, full of processes and strategies his teacher wouldn't tell him, or may not even know.

For now though, he set the wisdom aside and reached ever deeper into the drawer to retrieve his true prize. The mason jar was not particularly large, but its contents -- mostly dense liquid -- made it too heavy to lift with one hand. Wires spilled from its metal cap, trailing back to the car battery which had, for two weeks, fed a low but steady stream of electricity. Once, the liquid it contained had been green and nearly opaque. Now, it held only a hint of color. His creation hung suspended and secure at its heart.

She -- his creation -- was a homunculus, a perfect tiny human the size of a doll. Her skin -- darker than his own by several shades -- was flawless. Her hair -- loose black -- hung soft and wispy like that of a newborn. Her features, lovingly formed, were gorgeous in sleep.

Only the wires that ran from her shoulders, elbows, wrists, and spine betrayed her true nature. Where they connected, the flesh had not yet grown, exposing the tiny bars of copper alloy that made up her skeleton. Alvis had built her right here at his desk, bone by bone and joint by joint, over the course of an entire year. He'd forged her joints out of hot copper and sanded the metacarpals down by microns. It was painstaking. Exacting. Mind-bending. And absolutely worth it.

Alvis placed the mason jar on his desk, stroking its glass surface in place of her cheek. He leaned close and whispered to the glass in Russian, "Dobroye vecher. Nadeyus' ty sebya khorosho chustvuyesh'."

He paused a moment to let that sink in, then repeated, in English this time, "Good evening. I hope you're doing well."

His creation did not respond, because she had no life. Not yet.

This is what he'd needed Tamara for. The forging of the skeleton, the creation of the tincture, that was the Black Phase of this Great Work, the initial stage of breaking down and

bringing together that he could complete alone. Technically, he could have done the whole thing alone. He could have added only his own blood at the start of the White Phase and continued on from there without ever involving a stranger. But if he had done that, then she -- his creation -- would not have been herself. She would have been Alvis. He didn't want that for her.

That was why he brought in Tamara, for Her sake. Whatever the girl had been through since then, he could only hope that she did not remember, and that some part of her would forgive him anyway.

He continued to whisper to the jar in a mix of Russian and English. Soon enough, he would have to put her away again. It was too dangerous to have her out while the master was at home. If Darius found out that Alvis had risked going so far beyond what he'd been taught, he would be furious. Alvis didn't want to think what he would do.

Still. He would leave soon enough. He always did. Soon, that time would come. The last stage would be completed. She would wake. And Alvis would never be lonely again.

CHAPTER THREE

Howling wind. Panting breath. Feet pounding an ancient path.

Mara ran with all her body could muster, until her muscles screamed and her heart hammered in her ears. At the end of the old bridge stood a shadow, tall as a man despite its furry haunches curled low to the ground. A long, black coat blew in the in the wind. Or was that a tail?

It called to her, beckoning with pale hands and delicate fingers tipped with bloody claws. Hard as she ran, Mara should have crossed the bridge by now, yet it stretched as far before her as it did behind. She threw herself forward, giving a final burst, and felt something inside her spark like struck flint.

Her feet hit solid earth. In the next step, the earth hit back. It seized her leg and brought her down. She heard her head strike and felt her palm slice open.

The shadow hunched beside her, pale face blinded by the sun. Whiskers twitched and pink limbs moved. She thought it might have said, *I'm sorry*.

She took its pale hand. Her fingers closed on plastic, not skin.

Mara jerked awake, the resounding *wrong* popping her dream like a bubble. What she had thought to be a stranger's hand was actually her phone. It glowed white in the otherwise dark room. She lay on her side on her lumpy dorm mattress, staring out at an equally familiar small room. A mirror on the opposite wall reflected her phone light, along with that which peeked through the cracked curtains behind her. Beneath her head, between pillow and hair, lay a damp towel.

That's right. After dinner and curfew, she'd spent her first night back in the dorms re-dying the streak in her bangs. She must have fallen asleep while it dried, and she'd been reading on her phone. Silena, no doubt, had turned off the lights.

Now that she was reoriented, Mara shook herself hard and tossed her quilt to the side, silently dropping the extra foot between her and the floor. She sank to her knees, dragged out her backpack, and clawed through it until she'd unearthed her sketchbook and a pen. She propped her cell phone up as a flashlight and drew.

Eyes, eyes, she'd seen the bastard's eyes right before the end. She'd crossed the bridge and found the island and she could almost see his face, but even as she sketched the image slipped away.

Her phone timed out, its screen light fading and then flickering away. She jammed the side to bring it back, then did it again when it kept happening, furiously sketching by whatever light she could keep until the lamp overhead came alive.

Her roommate Silena peered down from her own bed, rubbing her one eye with the knuckle of her good hand. Silena should have been pretty. She had dust-pale skin and a heart-shaped face and thick black hair that grew almost to her waist. She could've modeled, even with her full figure, if weren't for the ugly scars that marred the left half of her face. They resembled

claw marks or tiger stripes, a few long gashes of white that gouged out her eye and stretched down her neck. A matching set marred her right forearm, ending in a hand with only one finger and a thumb. The rumor was that she'd been in a snow machine accident or been attacked by wolverines. No one knew for sure, and Silena didn't tell.

"You know what time it is?" she demanded, draping a curtain of hair to cover the scars.

Mara glanced at her phone. It was, apparently, 6:32 AM.

"What, you need a nurse?"

"No." Mara turned her phone off and set it aside. "I'm fine."

"Right." Grumbling, Silena retrieved her glasses from the desk and peered at the page in Mara's lap. "What's that?"

Mara snapped the book shut, covering the half-man, half-otter that haunted her dreams. "It's nothing. A sketch."

Silena made a noise with her throat that might have been disapproving or disbelieving. Either way, it ticked Mara off. She tossed her sketchbook aside and grabbed the towel off her bed, adding a fresh replacement, an extra pair of clothes, and her toiletries bag.

Silena tracked her movement, still scowling in the lamp-light. "Where're you going now?"

"Bathroom. That okay with you?"

It was hard not to be sharp with Silena. Last year, when first they met, Mara tried to make friends. Silena didn't want friends. She wanted her way, everything in its place and every bed made the moment you left it. Mara also liked things her way, which meant relaxed with loose blankets and hoarded art supplies. Worst still, privacy was impossible because Silena never left

the room. She sulked around like a gargoyle, reading her books or doing god-knows-what on her computer. That she only glanced from either to pass judgment did not help their relationship.

She judged Mara now, staring down her cute little half-white nose as though Mara were the bug she'd found in her food.

Mara turned a cold shoulder and grabbed her toothbrush from the sink. "I need a shower."

"No kidding." Silena returned her glasses to the desk, placing them neatly alongside her prosthetics. "Dye your hair in there from now on. It stinks when you do it here."

Mara flipped her off, and Silena again put out the light.

#

This early on a weekday, the dorm's showers were thankfully empty. Mara claimed the shower stall furthest from the door and ran the water cold to clear her head. Head bowed but eyes open, she watched the excess dye swirl down the drain in green spirals. It reminded her of painting, rinsing the first brush in new water. That helped to calm her. Her annoyance drained away with the green.

One last time, she closed her eyes and tried to summon up the stranger from her dream. He'd been so clear, and she was so sure that she knew his face. He was the reason she'd been sick. He was the reason that she couldn't remember. He'd done something to her, she knew it.

Still, his face didn't come. Water gushed over ears and down her cheeks and neck, bringing back the waves that rushed in when she fell. She shivered. She usually didn't fear water, but when it pinned her like that and pulled her under, she could only think of her brother...

She opened her eyes. The sound of waves didn't fade. It hadn't come from the dream at all.

Mara turned on the spot, searching for its source. It didn't come from the faucet. The waves sounded softer and more rhythmic, almost musical compared to the rush of pressured fury. She shut off the shower, catching the drips until silence prevailed.

The waves lingered. She looked to the window, but of course it couldn't be the ocean, she was much too far from shore. So where...?

Again, she closed her eyes, focusing this time as hard as she could on the sound. Was it coming from the walls? Waves in the walls, no, that was crazy. And yet...

She pressed her ear to the tile. The waves were definitely there, but now that she really listened, she found they weren't waves. They were whispers. A voice. No, a dozen voices, all speaking with a single tongue like the beat of waves against the shore.

...she had to be losing her mind.

She shook herself. Dried. Dressed. And left the bathroom.

The wave-whispers didn't follow her into the empty hall. Even when she tried to listen, all she heard were the footsteps and muted voices of other early birds already active in their rooms. Her head felt fuzzy -- she must still be half-asleep. The whispers were part of her dream.

Back in her room, without turning on the light or sparing Silena a glance, she traded the toiletries for her backpack and grabbed her coat before heading out.

Outside remained dark, but not the dark of pure night and certainly not as deep as it would get in the winter. To the east-southeast, the sun's first orange beams peered over the mountains that comprised most of Latea Island. At the base of the range sat the City of Latea, still in shadow for now, its glittering lights reflected in the dark waters of the Sound. Its harbor

held hundreds of boats, from commercial fishers to private skiffs. Mara could hear their rocking on the waves from here.

In contrast, Metharme Island stood in near-darkness, lit only by the on-campus parking lights and the scattered posts that guarded the MVH grounds. Some private homes lay to the north, but the thick birch and spruce hid them from view.

Mara headed south from the dorms, ambling past the gym to the southernmost tip of the island. She glanced east to the city lights, which shown even as the sunlight began to reach them. Latea was a large city only by Alaskan standards. In the Lower Forty-Eight, it wouldn't be a city at all. But compared to Keijin, it seemed huge and sprawling and filled with so many more opportunities. She never saw lights like this back home.

She filed the complete image, along with her thoughts and feelings, away in her mind for another day. Then she turned for the open sea, abandoning the sidewalk's path to the gym in favor of stepping onto the grass. The lawn sloped down for about thirty feet, then ended in a sheer, short drop to the open sea, earth and grass supported by concrete and stone. With the sun still rising and the lawn well away from the lights, it was hard to tell where the grass ended and the dark, restless waters began.

Mara felt her way as close as she dared to the edge and sat down. Dew and sea-salt soaked into her jeans. She took off her backpack and sat cross-legged, listening as hard as she could to the waves. High tide here was nothing like high tide back home. There, large waves would have splashed up over the edge; compared to that, the waters of the Latea Sound stood practically still. Even in the dark, she could see distant splashes of life -- seals or whales or otters taking advantage of the peace before the boats left port to relax, hunt, or catch a moment of sleep.

She watched the shadows for a few long breaths, then let her eyes slide closed. Without thinking about it, she began to breath in-time with the rhythm of the waves. Her mind cleared. Her thoughts focused. Her body relaxed.

She lay back in the grass, folding her arms behind her head and letting the peace flow through her. She'd nearly drifted off despite the early-morning chill when approaching heavy footsteps broke the silence.

She opened her eyes. A broad-shouldered black boy smiled down at her, coiling hair spilling over his head like clouds in a storm.

Mara's lips twitched into a smirk. "Hey Syd."

"Yo."

Syd Green -- full name Sydney -- was Caden's roommate, the only black kid at Mount Vilna High. He'd come in from the Outside, Washington State, and could thread a needle on the first try despite the size of his constantly moving hands.

He plopped into the grass next to Mara and sprawled out, completely at ease. In truth, he worked at least as hard if not harder than anyone she knew, but he never looked it. Syd offered the best tech support on campus, almost single-handedly maintaining the computer lab and fixing the worst problems right out of the dorm he shared with Caden.

As he settled on the grass, he pulled what appeared to be a mechanical beetle from his pocket and set about fiddling with its jointed plastic legs.

"You're breaking curfew," he said, without accusation.

Mara craned her head for a glimpse of the clock atop the admin building. 7:15. While not the strictest rule, weekend curfew officially ended at eight. "So are you."

"True. But I was on watering duty for the bio class. And I'm not on doctor's orders to take it easy because I just left the hospital wing."

"Sickbay," Mara corrected. Then, "You're a nerd."

"Proud of it." Syd grinned, like it was somehow not completely ridiculous. He flicked the multi-tool to a screwdriver and opened the beetle's stomach, exposing a nest of mechanisms and gears. "Funny thing, finding you out here. Especially since Caden planned to pick you up at the dorm for breakfast."

Mara winced. Right. Caden had said that when they split up last night. He'd been fussing over her all day, so she'd tuned him out by then.

"Did you text him, at least?"

She turned out her coat pockets. No phone.

"You're going to give that boy a heart attack one of these days." Syd clicked his tongue like a mother hen and handed her his phone instead. His chat log with Caden held over 300 messages.

Mara watched him over the device while her fingers stumbled through unfamiliar controls. It weirded her out sometimes how quick Syd and Cay became friends. This semester was Syd's first; he'd transferred in for sophomore year. It'd been less than two months since then, yet he and Caden hung out daily, ate together, even shared their games.

Mara supposed she might be jealous. Yet, she had to admit that Syd was good for her oldest friend. Caden never wanted to leave Keijin. He didn't care what college he went to or dream about going Outside. All he wanted was to get his pilot's license. But Mara's father wouldn't let her come alone, so Caden had tagged along and been miserably homesick their

entire freshman year. That he could adjust so much better now was thanks in no small part to Syd.

For that, Mara could be grateful, but it didn't mean that she owed him any explanation, not about the phone and not about her morning. To his credit, Syd didn't try. They fell to easy silence instead, watching golden sunlight gradually streak the sea and sky.

By the time it fully rose, Syd had fixed his toy and showed Mara how winding it one way would run the legs while the other made the wings open so it could fly.

"I call him Khepri," he said proudly as it fluttered from his hand into Mara's. And she had to admit, it was a clever little thing.

By then the scent of frying eggs and bacon was drifting in from the Mess, so they went for breakfast and managed to be the first in line. Trays piled high, they snagged a spot in the far corner and fell to people-watching as their classmates trickled in.

Within the hour, Caden rushed in, dodging the line completely in favor of scanning the tables with frantic eyes. Syd shot Mara an "I told you so," look, but she was already on high alert. Caden could be mother-hennish, sure, but he didn't panic without reason. And the mess was too empty, even for a Saturday.

"There you are," Caden gasped, spotting them at last and hurrying over.

"Easy, Cay." Syd rose from his chair to catch him before he could stumble into the table.

"Don't come on too strong. You're gonna give yourself a--"

"Where have you been?" Caden barely acknowledged Syd, too busy addressing Mara as he leaned over the table to catch his breath. "Besides here. Did you go... anywhere else this morning?"

Mara studied him, paused long enough for him to catch his breath. She almost imagined she could hear his pounding, worried heart.

"The shore behind the gym. Why?"

Caden breathed deep, his shoulders shaking. He calmed as he exhaled and stole a muffin off Mara's tray.

"You guys need to see this."

#

The trophy hall at Mount Vilna High was nothing impressive, though it was the first thing anyone would see coming through the main entrance. Connecting the admin offices with the main class building, it featured a dozen or so glass-doored display cases crowded with the fruits from thirty years of hockey, academic decathlon, track, rowing, cross-country, dance, and the Eskimo-Indian Olympics. The spaces between shelves contained somber portraits of former principals and ancient "headmasters," while the floor bore a tiled mural of the school mascot, a jaeger, taking flight.

Like most students, Mara had passed through this hall at least once nearly every day for two semesters. Normally, she wouldn't even give a second glance. It just wasn't worth gawking over.

Today though, the doors to the classroom building had been locked and it seemed like half the students at MVH had come to crowd the row of double doors that made up the front entrance. They all spoke at once, pressed shoulder to shoulder and whisper-shouting in hushed voices as though that would somehow keep down the noise.

Mara tuned them out best she could, ducking low to shoulder her way through the mess of taller students, both upperclassmen and not. Caden and Syd got stuck behind, Syd bellowing protests over the crowd, but they were both tall. With the right angle, they'd see before she did.

Muttering "excuse mes" under her breath, she pushed her way to the very front and finally emerged under the arm of a senior, who cursed her in Gwitch'en. Mara would have responded, but she caught sight of what Caden had wanted to show, and it took away her breath.

The trophy hall had been destroyed.

Every single case had been shattered or toppled or splintered, or all three. The trophies that could be slashed or shredded had been; the rest lay dented and defiled, a few even driven into the plaster walls. Glass and metal and plastic carpeted the floor, along with a viscous black goo that sank into the stone and had been flung across walls. Where the goo didn't cover had been gouged with deep, violent slash marks that covered the walls, ceiling, and floor...

None of the gathered students dared enter, save for Mara, who stumbled right to the edge of the mess. The rest pressed tight as they could without breaching the door frame and muttered, trading theories and reactions and informing newcomers as they joined the crowd.

"Vandals," said a senior, nodding with play-acted stoic wisdom. "Broke in during the night."

"Duh," hissed a junior at his side. "But who? And why?"

"It was the Firebirds!" shouted an excitable boy with too-big ears, who looked ready to jump out of his shirt at the possibility. "Has to be. They're trying to psyche us out before the next game!"

"Don't be stupid," said Mara, though that would be asking a lot from Danny Goto. He hadn't gone a day since freshman orientation without making a fool out of himself somehow.

Careful to avoid the glass, Mara eased into a crouch and dipped fingers into the black goo. She'd expected maybe tar or drying paint, but no, it felt wet, thin and stagnant. It clung to her fingers in long, sticky strands and smelled of contradiction, like still-burning ashes turned to mud.

A blaring whistle made her jump, taking the black blob along for the ride. Coach Aronofsky, the towering ex-Soviet who ran sports and P.E., bellowed from the back of the crowd that students were to disperse immediately. The mob obeyed, thinning around Mara as she dug an old bandanna from her pocket to wipe her hands. The cloth absorbed only a bit of the black. She wrapped the rest up as though Caden and Syd finally returned to her side. "Anyone know what happened?"

Caden shook his head. "Nah. The astronomy club found it like this."

Mara crossed her arms and stared him down. Sure, the club often came in early to lock up equipment and file reports about their star-gazing sessions, but there had to be more to it. He'd panicked, for her sake. The question was why.

It took only ten seconds before Caden started fidgeting. He lowered his voice. "The walls."

The walls, plaster and wood marred with deep scratches and soaked in oily black. Mara squinted at them and tilted her head until she caught the right angle of light and finally saw.

Circles, crosses, arrows, curves. Not all the gashes were random. Triangles and arches, slopes and slides stood out from the claw-marks, forming sigils and glyphs that tried to burn themselves into Mara's eyes. The largest resembled falling snow viewed through the arc of a bowing birch,



and there, tucked into the corner, lay a circle stabbed through an "X" like four swords.



Mara gripped the strap of her backpack. Not every symbol matched up, but she could see what Caden meant. The mess of glyphs and black looked exactly like the ink of drawings she made after her dreams.

A hand landed on her shoulder, heavy as a fallen beam. Mara half-expected it to be her father's. Instead, it belonged to a middle-aged white man with a regulation haircut and a pressed suit, all straight edges and ironed seams.

Mara swallowed a groan. Of all the things she didn't need right now, a run-in with Principal Aaron Faulkner topped the list.

Faulkner had once been an officer in the Marines. He'd run a military school down south before moving up here and saw Mount Vilna -- from its barracks to its population -- in the same light. Rumor held that he had, slowly but surely, tightened the rules for ten years. It culminated in the previous fall -- Mara's first semester -- when he'd introduced a new dress code that was one step down from uniforms.

The picture he'd proposed had been close, too close, to how things used to be back when the school first opened as a cultural assimilation center under the Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs. So Mara joined a protest to that effect. She hadn't been in charge, but she'd known, thanks to her father, all the strategies and steps they needed to get attention for their cause. Media attention at last forced Faulkner to concede and he'd resented the challenge to his

authority ever since. Even now, he sneered at her dyed hair and patch-strewn coat as though she'd dared to enter his school wearing a used trash bag.

"Ms. Edenshaw." He kept her name on the tip of his tongue like it tasted bad. "Come to watch the reaction to your latest work?"

"Excuse me?" Mara jerked a step back, but his hand kept her pinned. Caden and Syd likewise fell back and she didn't blame them.

An odd, high sound somewhere between a whimper and a cough came from over Faulkner's shoulder. Ms. Applegate -- their very young, very thin red-headed art teacher -- pushed circular glasses up her nose with uncertain hands. "Aaron, perhaps not here? Somewhere more private would be best. We don't want...you know. Rumors."

The crowd had thinned, but clusters of students still hung around, pretending not to watch. Others didn't bother pretending. Danny Goto even had his phone out like he expected someone to get shot.

Several pieces fell into place at once. Mara's heart began pounding in her ears. "You think I did this?"

"It certainly matches your recent experiments."

Ms. Applegate bit her lip and ducked her head. Pride was one thing and concern another, but god damn, was there anyone she hadn't told about this?

Mara held her breath, felt it crackling in her lungs. She wrenched her shoulder out of Faulkner's grip and stepped back. "This wasn't me."

"Really." Faulkner folded his arms behind his back. He kept his face blank, yet Mara could hear the smirk flickering through his every word. "Where were you this morning? Before sunrise, when you left the dorm."

Fire roared in Mara's ears. That someone had seen her leave wasn't a surprise, but it also wouldn't help her case. Mount Vilna had little budget for security, and most of their cameras -- including the ones in the trophy hall -- were dummies. Everyone knew it.

"I was outside. On the green." She looked to Syd, clenching fists to rein in her temper before it ignited. "Tell him."

Syd nodded, despite looking like he'd been slapped. "Honest truth, sir. M and I were together out there. Watched the sun rise and everything."

"Is that so?"

Mara stared the principal down, daring not to blink lest their broken eye contact strike a fuse. If she took the blame, she'd be expelled, no question. That couldn't happen. Not when she'd come this far.

"You're not pinning this on me."

With that, she turned her back to the man and stormed from the hall. Her neck and shoulders burned with the strain of staying tense and square. Ms. Applegate called after her, but before Faulkner could too another voice -- Mr. Petrov, demanding "Aaron, what the hell--" -- broke in, giving her the chance to escape into the lingering crowd.

CHAPTER FOUR

Careful, now. Careful. Careful...

The mantra echoed in Alvis's mind while he eased the twin tubes into blue-hot flame. Recycled glass warmed with ease until the circular mouths of each tube turned molten. He angled them to not quite ninety degrees and brought the mouths together. It took only a bit of pressure before they became one.

Alvis held his breath. He took the newly-united tube from the flame before the joining point could collapse. He blew on it until the glass faded from yellow to green -- not entirely cool, but close enough -- and held it arm's length. Before his nerve could object, he turned the tube upright and dumped the ashy powder from one end into the translucent gold ichor of the other.

The resulting concoction flashed once and jerked it so fiercely it almost leapt from the clamp. The tube filled with shimmering smoke, yet the seal binding the two halves held strong.

Alvis sighed, then chuckled in relief. He turned his grin to the jar on his desk and the tiny figure still sleeping inside. "You see? I've really got the hang of this now!"

The fairy continued to sleep, of course. She floated still, peacefully unaware of the world she would soon enter. Alvis grinned to himself and tucked the tube -- the third of his prototypes -- in an old glasses case alongside the other two. He doused the burner, stoppered the leftover ichor for another day, and moved it all back to the secret drawer. His teacher was out on the island, checking and resetting the traps and security measures. He'd been gone a while -- longer than their usual lunch break -- but surely he'd be back soon, and he'd expect Alvis to be waiting.

The last thing he cleared up was the leather-bound journal that had once been his father's. It lay open to a rough sketch of two long-billed, kissing birds -- an odd but not uncommon choice of metaphor for the procedure he'd just completed. Alvis trailed a finger through the loops of the now-familiar hand writing. For all he'd learned at his master's side, the act of creation felt somehow more when he knew it was his father guiding the way. He almost imagined he could hear the man's voice in the written words.

The slam of the front door brought him back to himself. His teacher had returned. He shouldn't wait to greet him; after all, they wouldn't be seeing each other again for a while. He snapped shut the book, stashed it and the homunculus jar in their drawer and -- with a final Russian farewell -- locked them up safe before heading downstairs, shaking the lingering haunt from his mind.

#

Alvis found his teacher in the Great Room, the central living space that took up most of the first floor before the lab had been added on to the back. Once, most of the boxes that occupied the kitchen had resided here, until the master's concentrated effort to consolidate the

mess in their least-used room. Yet a few ancient boxes remained, as they did everywhere, pushed to the walls and squeezed between shelves. The room's center seemed barren without them despite the presence of a few old chairs, a tattered rug, a study desk and their neglected chessboard.

Darius sat in the bench that had been built in one of the wide windows. Faigel perched on the curtain rod above him, preening in the sun. The crate of traps -- mostly glass vessels rigged with activation wires and wrapped in heavy cloth -- sat beside him on the floor alongside a heavy rucksack and a box of field supplies. He was already dressed for the road, which meant layers and boots and his Coat of Mastery, a canvass duster bearing embroidered sigils and the scars of experiments past.

He didn't look up when Alvis approached, too consumed with restocking his utility belt with vials of acid and fires and formulae that would keep him alive in the field. Alvis stood by, watching and toying anxiously with the ring he wore around his neck. He opened his mouth to speak, but found himself biting down on the ring instead. The taste of silver, familiar yet no comfort.

He didn't know what to say or do. He rarely did, without direct instruction. He was bad sometimes at being human. He suspected his teacher felt the same.

At last, the master grunted, pulling in his sprawling leg to free up half the bench. "Sit."

Alvis sat. The ring slipped from his teeth. He tucked his coat around him, half-hoping it would swallow him up with the shade.

He'd barely settled before his teacher grasped him by the coat, yanked him close, and sniffed him. His strong nose wrinkled.

"Iron shavings. Why?"

Alvis gulped and forced out the practiced line. "I found an old toy upstairs. Faces, where you draw the hair with magnets and iron shavings. It seemed interesting. I lost track of time."

It wasn't entirely a lie. He'd found a game exactly like that in one of the upstairs rooms and immediately cannibalized it for the iron it contained, so there'd be no risk of his teacher noticing a dip in the lab's stores.

A flicker, something nearly fond, flashed across his master's eye. His aura rippled as Darius released him and settled back into his work. Faigel, annoyed that she had been ignored, fluttered down from the curtains to Alvis's knee. She pecked at him until he acquiesced to pet her, grooming out the cardboard shreds clinging to her neck.

Alvis kept one eye to the task and the other to his teacher, who moved from stocking vials to checking the weight and blades of the many knives he would wear around his waist. That was always the final task before he left. To him, a sharpened blade meant good luck.

"How long will you be gone?"

The words 'this time hung after Alvis's question, unspoken and yet heard. His teacher barely glanced up.

"A week. Perhaps less."

"Oh."

Darius paused, a finger poised at the final knife's edge. His nostrils flared, his aura prodding Alvis's in search of...what? Did he suspect lies?

Alvis forced himself to breathe as normal, to keep his aura calm and give nothing away. Once, he would have asked to come along or begged his master to remain. Neither ever worked. That he'd stopped asking could mean acceptance or rebellion. He had to make the former clear.

The master set his chiseled jaw, pressing scars to scars. He held the long knife by its blade and used its grip to lift Alvis's chin. "You remember our rules, I trust?"

Alvis nodded as much as the leather-wrapped hilt would allow.

"They are here to keep our secrets. Our secrets keep you safe. You know this."

"Yes, sir."

Another deep sniff, nostrils flared to scent out the hint of deception. There wouldn't be any. Alvis had no intention of breaking the rules this time. Not those rules, anyway.

A grunt. Darius took the knife away, spun it to a proper grip, and returned it to its sheath. He stood, slung the belt around his waist, and hoisted the rucksack off the floor.

Faigel took his meaning and took flight with a happy trill that sent shivers up Alvis's spine. She made a lap around the Great Room before settling contentedly on the elbow Darius extended to her.

The master fondly stroked her head before turning attention again to his apprentice. Hesitation echoed in his aura and his eyes. He extended a hand and, for a moment, Alvis thought he might clasp his shoulder, or even draw him in for a hug. Instead, the rough fingers awkwardly tussled his hair.

"This must be cut soon," he said with a sigh. "Perhaps when I return."

With that as his only farewell, the master gathered his share of the rations and strode to the front door. Alvis fell into step behind him, lingering at the place where outside became in to watch his teacher set off down the trail that led to the bridge. He watched from the door until the shadows of the afternoon had swallowed his master whole. And he remembered.

Watching like this, watching him go like now but not, storming into the woods on a fuel of fury and shame. Another voice calling, "Come back! Come back!" until at last the order came to stop and stand down.

"He will return," says his father, pinning his shoulders tight from above. The urge to run burns strong, but dies beneath the pressure of his hands. "He must eventually and always. He has nowhere else to go."

CHAPTER FIVE

"Come with me."

It was probably a cheap shot, jumping Caden and Syd outside the comp-sci lab after their last class of the day, but Mara didn't care. They'd been in the mid-conversation about diodes or some other nonsense, all concerns of vandalism and strange symbols blissfully forgotten.

Mara couldn't forget. It'd been needling at her mind all day, Faulkner's accusations bouncing off the call from her dreams and pushing out all thought of physics or history. She'd even abandoned her canvas, barely touched, in favor of racing here at the first note of the final bell. The strained concern from Ms. Applegate would no doubt chase her for another week.

She looked between the boys, determination burning behind her eyes in a way that would have produced tears if she weren't so damn determined to keep them back. With the weight of the gradually-crowding hallway bearing down on her, she turned on her heel and headed straight for the nearest outside door.

Caden and Syd gave chase, though whether they did so out of surprise or concern Mara couldn't say. The throng of students bore down on her like a storm, impossibly loud compared to

the long silence of Sickbay. It took all she had to hold her purpose in mind long enough to escape the halls, exiting first the building and then the school gates.

Aside from their campus and a few secluded private homes, the only structure on Metharme Island was the ferry port on the northern tip. The rest belonged to the trees, a wild forest of crooked green spruce and autumn-gold birch left to its own devices save for the trails maintained by those who used them. Only the blacktop parking lot and some cultivated lawn separated MVH from where some of these paths began.

Syd stopped dead the moment his shoes hit grass.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I must have missed a memo. Where are we going?"

Mara set her jaw. She wanted to snap that he didn't have to go anywhere, and if he didn't want to come along he could leave. But that would be unkind. The question was fair, and Caden had stopped as well. He crossed his arms and waited, silent, for her reply.

Words and desires jumbled together, making the simple explanation harder than it needed to be. "I need to go back."

The boys exchanged a look, which only stoked her frustration. When had they become so close that they could talk without speaking, but Caden couldn't understand her now? She clenched and unclenched her fists, focusing on the muscles' burn to distract from everything else.

"Back there." She gestured vaguely to the trail. "Back where it started. I need to go back there, but I can't...not alone."

The words carried a healthy sense of self-preservation. Not fear. Mara didn't fear the beast in her dreams any more than she feared the void in her mind, the aching gulf of not knowing what she should that plagued her waking hours, or the creeping recognition that clawed through her every sideways glance of the ruined trophy hall. No, she simply had the good sense

to know that hunting the unknown alone was a good way to disappear for good. She needed back-up, someone to know where she was going. That was all.

She swung her backpack to the front and dug in, yanking out her sketchbook in a way that was almost habit. When words failed she'd always been able to trust art more. She opened it to the sketch from this morning, the one of her dream, and dropped it into Caden's outstretched hand.

"There. That's where I'm going. That's where it started."

"Where what started?" asked Syd, peering over Caden's shoulder

"Everything!" She flung up a hand, gesturing vaguely at the sky, the woods, her own head, as if that could consolidate everything that'd gone wrong these last few weeks. "My memory, the dreams, this vandalism..."

"Mar." Syd stepped around Caden, approaching with his hands raised like he was trying to placate an angry dog. "You got sick. Nothing started anywhere except in you."

God, she wanted to hit him. They weren't close enough friends for him to drop letters from her name.

"Something happened," she snapped. "I wasn't sick, I was poisoned. And the guy who did it, that guy--" She flung her hand at the sketch, half-tempted to flip off her own work in frustration. "He's the vandal. He has to be, I sure didn't do it, but I didn't pull those symbols out of my ass. If I don't prove it was him not me, Faulkner'll kick me out."

"Faulkner dropped the case." Caden's ability to stay calm no matter what should have been annoying, but the familiarity of it served as a balm instead. He held her sketchbook with careful hands, folding it shut and re-settling his glasses back where they belonged. "Petrov talked him down, he has no proof."

Mara snorted. "Never stopped him before." Still, his good sense did its job -- her frustration fizzled out. She stuffed her hands into the pockets of her coat and sighed. "I just need to see for myself. Please."

Syd shrugged, wisely deferring to Caden's judgment on the whole affair. Caden sighed.

"All right, ax já. Lead the way."

#

They doubled back to properly sign out of the dorms, then followed the trail on foot, forgoing Mara's usual biking in favor of a slow and careful route in case something low to the ground jogged her memory. The rev of student-driver engines and the chatter of their fellow students followed them for a while past the trees, but soon enough the packed earth lead them away from campus and the roads until the sounds of civilization faded to nothing. The forest crowded in from either side, neither the white-black wood nor the green-gray spruce stretching far enough to cover the trail though they did their best to offer shade. The path, worn not-quite flat by years of feet and bikes, bore a carpet of fallen yellow leaves.

As the path continued on without branching, Mara began to slow her pace and give up pretending to lead, drifting farther and farther back while the boys kept up their original speed. The farther away she got the less they seemed to notice, which rankled. Syd had produced another of his toys and was constantly leaning over to show Caden how the motor turned the mechanism to the joint and whatever. And Caden *responded*. They'd taken hikes like this before without ever needing to speak. Mara always thought that's what Caden preferred.

She scowled at the trail, slowing her feet ever further and trying instead to focus on the sounds of the forest. They'd reached the point where the trail went from winding around rocks to a deliberate curve that followed the shape of the coast. She could hear the waves on the other side of the trees. If she turned her head now, she should be able to catch a glimpse of the Latea Sound.

Only she couldn't.

A haze of *right-no-wrong-no-right* yanked Mara to a halt like a marmot in a snare. The curve had turned into something like a corner, an arc that turned inland to avoid a sudden watery breach. The trees opened to her left, nearly wide enough to be a road, but on the right they grew dense. Maybe too dense, for this close to the sea?

She stared into them, trying to remember why it bothered her so that she couldn't see the island's edge. She heard it -- clearly, on the other side, the gentle lap of water -- but she couldn't see through a dense mass of underbrush and loops of cloying, violently-green vines. A number of the trees looked half-fallen, perhaps collapsed under the weight of ice and snow. They leaned into and against each other in a net of wood and leaves and something about that just seemed... wrong.

Up ahead, Caden finally noticed that she'd fallen behind and doubled back to rejoin her with Syd on his heels. "What's up?"

Mara chewed her lip, the sting of each bite distracting from a growing pressure behind her eyes. She'd been here before. Of course she had, she'd ridden this trail more times than she could count. And yet...

It'd been different. She hadn't even noticed at first, too focused on the ache as she pushed her legs, mind closing in on the zen-like high of adrenaline and physicality that came from a

good ride. Then she'd seen something, someone, a shadow that leapt out of her path and scared her half to death, her bike skidding off the path as she lurched to a stop and the shadow ran.

Caden watched her carefully out of the corner of his eyes, judging without speaking which was not what she wanted at all. He leaned in for a closer look at the clinging, cloying vines and frowned. "I don't recognize these plants."

"Looks like pushki," muttered Mara.

"A little. But only the leaves. Cow parsnip grows on stalks, not vines."

"Looks like ivy to me." Syd wandered over, cell phone in hand. He snapped a picture of the vines, then reached for one of the many-pointed leaves to stabilize a close-up shot. "We can look it up when we get back to--"

Mara caught Syd's wrist before he could touch the leaf, yanking it a perhaps a bit harder than strictly necessary. "Don't."

Her snap made him jump, pulling back his arm like it'd been burned. "Why?"

"If it's related to pushki, it'll be poison. Cow parsnip makes skin blister in the sun."

Syd immediately backed off. Caden nodded as if agreeing to the wisdom of caution, but continued to watch Mara from the corner of his eye.

"The growth's too thick for regular travel," he said in the same neutral tone his uncle used to not accuse his alcoholic patients. "Nobody's been through here in a long time."

Of course he was right, but she couldn't shake the memory. That had to be what it was, it'd been too clear to be a dream.

She turned away as the boys started whispering again, probably wondering what to do with her now. She had to think. The waves were so close, she could hear them pounding the rocks even through the trees. And she could hear something else, too.

She cocked her head towards the odd vines and listened, the way she had in the shower. The sound seemed lower than the waves but higher than her ears ringing. It seemed almost like wind through the leaves, but... was that her imagination, or was it turning into words?

The *crack* of shattering glass startled her back to attention. That hadn't come from either her or the boys. It came from the other side of the trees.

"Something's coming."

Caden glanced up. "Eh?"

"Something is *coming*." Her nerves alight, Mara's every instinct screamed at them to hide. Now. "Get off the road."

She hauled Caden back by his coat, dragging a protesting Syd for the ride as she pushed them both off the trail and into the underbrush. She pulled them down with her, pressing her stomach into sharp roots and vines and using all her weight to keep them down, below the lip of the brush.

A second later, the trees went up in an emerald blaze.

Syd let out surprised yelp, grabbing for Caden and catching Mara instead as brilliant green flame licked dangerously close to their hiding place. Mara stared, her mouth dry, unable to blink or untangle herself from Syd's limbs. It was beautiful, this flame. Like being at the heart of a strong aurora.

Fierce as it burned, only the green parsnip vines seemed affected by its blaze. They burned away and crumbled to the ground, while the trees they surrounded were barely touched. There came a great groaning as the apparently-dead roots pulled at the dirt, drawing the trunks up straight. One leapt up so close to Caden's head that it would have hit him if he hadn't lurched

back at the last second. The move dislodged his glasses, which disappeared into the brush beneath their hands.

Beyond the fire and the groaning trees, another thirty feet of dirt road opened up, a perfect match to the not-quite-road on the opposite side. The newfound clearing lead straight to the edge of the land, where the earth jutted out in a spike a few feet over the water's edge. Just short of the edge stood an old pick-up truck, heavily dented and equipped with all-terrain tires. Beside the truck, wreathed in green flame, stood a man.

He was not of any race or tribe that Mara knew. He had dark hair and darker eyes, beady and mean as they glared out over a twisted scowl. His long black coat dragged close to the ground, its tattered tails torn and ragged. A wicked, sickle-shaped scar marred his right cheek, trailing from a square nose to a mangled ear and down again along his neck. Green fire flickered around his right hand and down the arm, sparks alighting along the seams of his coat and searing the dead plants around his boots.

As they watched, the man ran his gloved hands together until he'd gathered the remaining fire in his palms. He blew it out, releasing pale smoke that seemed to please the bird on his shoulder. The bird seemed the most alien detail of all, its white feathers and regal bearing a sharp contrast to the gnarled, lumbering bear of a man.

He reached into the back of his truck and pulled out a large jar which might have once sold pickles but was now filled with electric blue liquid and coils of thin rope. Standing in the gap between trees, the bear-man tossed the coils up in to the branches, letting some thin strands hang down while most tangled in needles and leaves. Then, without so much as a glance towards their hiding place, he hobbled back to the truck and swung into the driver's seat.

Mara caught a final glance of him as the pick-up rumbled past, his bird perched in the passenger's seat. The truck rumbled easily across the bike trail and down the unkempt road, disappearing into the distance on its way back to civilization.

She and her friends remained frozen, staring into the gap that had not been there before, trying to process everything they'd just seen.

"Holy shit," muttered Syd from behind her.

For once, Mara was inclined to agree.

#

Mara couldn't guess how long the three would have stayed there, frozen in shock, if it weren't for the cracking noise overhead that stirred them from their stupor. The green coils dangling over and around the trees were beginning to thicken. They shifted through branches as giant snakes, loose ends squirming and grasping at the air in search of purchase. The tree they huddled under groaned in protest as its roots began to shift again, rising from the dirt. The half-fallen trees were being pulled together again, like a gate. The process was slow, but she had no doubt that it would eventually close back up exactly like the natural wall they'd seen before.

"That is not how it worked in biology," muttered Syd under his breath. He and Caden were both on hands and knees, with Caden feeling through the underbrush for his lost glasses.

Mara drew herself up, stepping into the clearing exposed by the open trees. The underbrush here was well-trampled, torn up from its roots, which she should have noticed before. Past the trees lay an empty patch of earth, stripped barren by weed-killer or flame, which lead

right to the edge of the island and a five-foot drop into the sea. And there, at the very end, jutting from the edge of the shore, was the bridge from her dream.

It wasn't exact. She hadn't dreamed of the rotted wood, the rusted frame, or the variety of "No Trespassing" and "Private Property" signs that decorated it. Yet, now that she saw it, she knew it to be one and the same, a simple foot bridge connecting the edge of Metharme to a tiny, forgotten island nestled along the edge of its coast.

Her hands shook. She rubbed the palms on her jeans until the friction burned and revved herself up to push forward. Behind her, Caden had found his glasses and Syd was already crashing his way out of the weeds. Neither of them looked happy to see where she had turned.

"What are you doing?" asked Caden, finally getting his glasses clean and settling them back on his face.

Mara rolled her fingers into fists. "I'm going."

Syd threw up his hands. "Girl!" he groaned. "The guy left. We saw him. We believe you, he's freaky. Now's the time to bail before it gets any weirder."

"That wasn't him." The conviction tasted bitter. Mara swallowed the urge to spit -- her mother taught her better than that. "There's someone else. I would have drawn that scar."

Caden sighed, but in the same breath she heard him fall into step behind her. She muffled the hint of a grin and set off, old wood creaking under her first step but holding strong.

Behind them, Syd let out a second dramatic groan, but his steps likewise followed Caden's. "Call me paranoid," he announced to no one in particular except maybe his own frustration. "But when I moved up here my mom warned me about crazy survivalist nut-cases who rig their property with land mines and shoot before answering questions while feeding the remains to their dogs. Try and tell me a guy who sets himself on fire isn't exactly that type."

She couldn't. It was, Alaska had its fair share of hermit survivalist homesteaders, or people who encouraged the reputation to secure their privacy. But it was too late to turn back now. They'd come for answers, so they would simply have to risk what they found.

They crossed to the island, Syd's direction-less complaints mixing with the crash of waves and the distant creak of the trees closing up behind them. In addition to the six signs on the bridge, Mara counted another three driven into the earth on the island side, including one that read "Beware of..." and was missing the bottom half. Syd went quiet when he saw it, though. Maybe he didn't want to alert the hypothetical dogs.

When her feet hit solid ground, she paused to consider the next step -- even if the woods were trapped, there was bound to be a safe path. Caden slipped up beside her and say, "Want to see something weird?"

She raised an eyebrow at him. As if green fire and living vines weren't weird enough?

He held out a fistful of soot-covered wire, delicate enough that they threatened to crumble at any second. "These were all over the ground."

"So?"

With the other hand, he offered what seemed to be a green twig until Mara realized that the chlorophyll gradually gave way to gleaming copper wire. The other end, which was still green, bore the tiny buds of new leaves that unfurled even as they watched.

"Pulled this off the mystery vines. Figure it's the parsnip. That's probably where the wires came from too." His point made, he let the leaf slip from his fingers and frowned at the copse of trees. "What are we dealing with?"

"Dunno," said Mara. "Let's find out."

She picked a spot that looked the most like a path and led the way, keeping her eyes peeled and her ears open. She half-expected another memory to dislodge, but trees were trees and they looked more or less the same. She picked her way across a path that seemed relatively worn, initially focused on where she put her feet until she caught a glimpse of a symbol in the corner of her eye.



It was carved into the trunk of a nearby birch, with a knife that dug in deep enough to rake through the soft wood and leave the sap exposed to rot. The wound had crusted over with black like a scab, which mimicked the way that birch trees naturally grew; but now that she'd recognized the shape she could spot more adorning maybe every fourth white trunk in the woods ahead.

She held up a hand to call the boys to a stop and shuffled forward for a closer look. If she leaned close enough to put her eye to a knothole, she could almost see... yes, there. Inside the carving glinted metal, something tarnished and shaped like a honeycomb. It might be chicken wire.

But before she could call over her friends she heard a great creaking over her head, followed by Caden's yelp of horror. "Mara, look out!"

He grabbed her from behind before she could move, hauling her backwards off her feet just as the birch tree swung its branch right onto where she'd been standing. The impact flung up the fallen leaves from the ground and jarred Mara off balance, sending her reeling back.

The birch continued to flail at them, slamming its branches into the nearby spruce and flinging its leaves like a rain of dull knives. It set off another tree with the same mark, then

another and another until the entire copse was full of birches thrashing their branches on the ground in search of a victim.

Syd let out a yelp and bolted off the path. Presumably he'd meant to go back to the bridge, but in his desperation he instead dove head-long even deeper into the trees. Mara yelled for him to stop, scrambling to get her balance back to go after him. She'd barely gotten back up when they caught a loud *BANG!* and Syd disappeared into a cloud of smoke.

"Syd!" Caden shouted, and took off after his roommate with Mara right on his heels. Her heart and lungs were on fire. What if Syd was right? What if it had been a land mine?

They broke into the cloud of smoke, flailing their arms frantically to brush it away. Syd coughed, choking and mewling up a storm. "My leg! I can't feel my leg! Oh god, oh god, I can't look, I can't look..."

At last the smoke cleared enough to see. She found Syd sprawled across the roots of a normal spruce, one arm flung over his eyes. His right leg came up short and, for a horrid second, Mara feared that he really had blown off his foot. Then she saw.

Syd's leg wasn't gone, it'd been caught. Stone tentacles burst from beneath the roots like an octopus emerging from its cave, wrapped around his ankle and gripped tight. They smoked slightly and were warm to the touch, but held on as tight and solid as cement.

Mara's breath caught in her throat. She'd drawn this mess in her sketchbook in the haze of a dream.

If Caden noticed, he didn't say anything in favor of trying to calm Syd down. It didn't work; he was hysterical. Around them, the birch continued to pound the earth and its neighbors, shaking off what was left of its falling leaves. The pounding of the trees, the pounding of the earth, the pounding of her head...it was too much. Mara needed silence.

She grabbed Syd by the collar and shook him as hard as she dared. "Be. Quiet!"

His jaw snapped shut so hard she heard his teeth clatter. Caden opened his mouth to object but Mara cut him off by holding up one hand. Her heart raced fast, too fast, like fireworks in her ears. She breathed in rapid time, then forced herself to go more and more slowly, until eventually her heart calmed.

And in that time, while they were silent and still, the birch trees gradually stopped. The went from wild attacks to slow shakes and, at last, a soft rustling. The shudder of raining leaves was so consuming, like a white noise, that Mara could almost imagine the trees had never moved at all.

Once she was certain they'd stilled, she straightened out of her crouch over Syd with a sigh. He'd calmed down as well, though his breathing was not quite normal. She could practically hear his heart hammering against his ribs.

"Better?" she asked.

Syd gave a shuddering gasp. "Yeah. No. Get me loose."

Caden relaxed with a laugh of his own and clapped his roommate on the shoulder. "You big wimp."

"Wimps stay alive, pal. Now find a rock."

"You don't need one." For all that her brain was trying to break out of her skull, Mara remembered that much -- a single bold image standing out against the haze of her first visit. She swung her backpack around, retrieved a half-full water bottle, and dumped it onto the tentacles. The stone gave a soft hiss and crumbled away.

Syd swore under his breath and propped his leg on the other one to check for a sprain. Mara didn't see swelling, but he had scraped up the knee pretty bad; it was bleeding through his khakis.

Mara sat back on her heels, taking the moment to catch her breath while Caden cautiously stood for a look around. She plucked the leaves out of her hair and rubbed the grass-stains on her jeans, checking herself over for any aches or pains. Nothing. In fact, aside from Syd's knee, none of them had been hurt at all.

"You know," she said, "I don't think these traps are meant to kill. I think they're deterrents. To scare folks."

Syd snorted, brushing the last of the cement-dust from his sock. "Or we just missed the deadly ones. Can we turn back now?"

Mara swatted him, accidentally-on-purpose hitting the wounded knee. "Not yet. We're almost there."

"Almost where? There's nothing here!"

Caden cleared his throat, drawing their attention up and north. Through trees both normal and still shuddering on their roots, they could just catch a glimpse of a house.

It stood two stories tall and vaguely pyramid-shaped, with a steep slope to the roof that would make it easy for the melting snow to run down. Its walls were a mix of pale wood and gray local stone, except where they gave way to wide windows, which had their curtains tightly drawn. A second structure, a rectangle with glass walls that glinted in the pale afternoon sun, seemed to have been grafted onto the back. And, though they couldn't tell exactly what the mark looked like from here, Mara could pick out the circular mounts of a kind of simple crest that decorated every window, door frame, and keystone.

Syd gave a final groan, but at least this one was of resignation not reluctance. He hauled himself to his feet, winced as he brushed the dirt from his knee, and said, "Fine. Let's get this over with."

If it'd been any other situation, Mara might've smirked in triumph. Instead, she set her shoulders and mentally prepared for whatever they would find inside.

CHAPTER SIX

Alvis waited nearly half an hour, pacing the Great Room and slipping in and out of meditation before he finally concluded that yes, his master would not be returning. Though his excitement threatened to boil over, he kept himself in check with several deep breaths. He couldn't afford to lose control of himself, not now. Not at the most critical stage.

Once he'd calmed down, he gathered his supplies and hurried upstairs to set up a secondary lab at the desk in his room. To one side, he set a clean glass basin and a gallon jug of distilled water. On the other, he brought out his creation, still in her jar, still connected to the car battery, still exactly as beautiful as she'd been the day before.

At the top of the desk, he placed the leather journal with the mark of the Black Phase that had guided him through this entire process. He'd read the steps of the Red Phase over so many times that he no longer needed to refer to them, but kept the book near for good luck. Besides, the processes of the final stage worked best if one could perform them without thinking. He simply had to trust that he'd done everything else correctly and let his quintessence guide him from there.

Slowly, carefully, he drew his creation from her jar. He lay her flat, trimmed the copper wires, and folded their remains carefully over her exposed joints. The skin would soon heal over these wounds. He would treat them with the same potions the master used on their wounds, but that would come later. First, the birth. First, life.

He gathered her up in both palms and cradled her close. Already, he could feel the slightest thrum of potential in her heartstone, the tiny crystal he'd grown from red tincture and set in her chest like the stone atop a rung. He lowered her into the basin, washing the last green ooze from her skin and hair. She washed up true ochre, smooth as brown egg from her neck to her toes. Her hair spread about her head like a halo.

Once she was clean, Alvis dried her with wash cloth and covered her new skin in a simple white smock, tied at the waist with a cord. She lay still as a corpse once he finished, but it would not be correct to call her a thing. She was a creature yet to be.

Holding his breath, he leaned over her, using his thumb to ease open her tiny jaw. As his mind repeated the mantra of the Emerald Tablet, he focused on the quintessence within him, the penetrating fifth element and source of all life. Bringing his mouth as close to hers as he dared, he breathed life into her tiny form.

His quintessence struck her heartstone like flint against steel. Her lungs filled, then deflated.

Alvis held the fifth element on his breath and counted ten seconds before breathing again, the tiny chest rising and falling. Three more tries exhausted the bit of life that he could spare, but by then his creation took over for herself. Her chest rose and fell, rose and fell. It moved under her own power as the spark of life spread into a tiny, brilliant flame -- a quintessence all her own.

She jerked, bolting awake with a silent gasp. Her eyes flew open, as pale as his own.

Alvis retreated, giving her the space to explore her new existence for herself. His creation lay flat and breathed hard as her eyes taught themselves to focus and adjust. Her arm moved, lingering first on the cloth of her makeshift dress. Then she lifted her hands to the light and acknowledged them for the first time as a part of her body. She moved them, traced her fingers' shapes with their fellow digits, then trailed them down down to explore the shape of her arms, chest, waist, hips.

Alvis bit his lip. She hadn't seen him yet, as her eyes were too new to focus that far. When her searching hands found the table-top her entire body went still. Then, she flopped over and rose to her hands and knees. She pressed her palms into the wood and traced the rough grain, fascinated by this thing that was not a part of her. Her eyes adjusted and saw for the first time her own reflection in the varnish. She rose to her knees, her hands now exploring her face, her neck, her hair, her eyes.

Warmth blossomed in Alvis's chest. He loved her. How could he not? She was his own.

He swallowed once to clear his throat and said, in English, "Hello."

His creation lurched her entire body around to stare up at him. Her eyes refocused, drawing a gasp as she scrambled back. She tried to stand, tripped over her own heel and tumbled down all over again. Rolling to all fours, she scurried behind the glass dish and curled up, hands over her tiny head. She shook so badly that her exposed knees met again with metallic clicks.

Despite the sting in his heart, Alvis told himself to not take it personally. She's a newborn. In her eyes, the world must be dangerous and huge. It would take time to teach her better.

He lay both his hands flat on the table and lowered his voice to barely more than a whisper. "It's all right. Don't be scared. I won't hurt you."

The trembling stopped. Still on all fours, his creation peered around the glass edge.

Alvis smiled at her and pointed to himself. "It's good to see you. I'm Alvis." He carefully enunciated each word, giving her newly-formed mind a chance to wrap itself around sounds it had previously heard only through a barrier of tincture and glass. Once it settled, he added, "Do you understand?"

She stared up at him, pale eyes unblinking and stretched a bit too wide. Her face twitched once before mimicking his smile. She did it again, then nodded.

Alvis breathed a silent sigh, thanking the leather journal for its good Lore. Complex language would require more instruction, and with so small a bright she might never master it, but at least they could communicate with simple words.

He slid his hand towards her, slow and un-threatening. Her head bobbed, following the path of his fingers. He drummed them, causing another tiny jerk, but this time it dissolved into itty-bitty laughter rather than fear. She giggled, covering her mouth with her hands and rolling back onto her heels.

Alvis chuckled along with her. He switched language, his whisper shifting to a low rumble in his throat. "A eto? Teper' vy ponimayete?"

Her smile wavered, becoming a small, squished dot as she contemplated his words. She bobbed her head one way, then the other, then finally nodded again, pleased as peach with her own abilities.

"Korosh. Come here?"

Alvis turned his hand palm-up, laying the knuckles flat against the table. His creation screwed up her tiny face and pushed off the ground in an attempt to stand. She nearly fell, only

to fling her arms out at the last second and balance on her toes like a dance. She took two stumbling steps, tripped, and landed in Alvis's palm.

Alvis cupped the other hand to catch her and scooped her close. "Are you all right?"

The jar-fairy giggled again, lying upside down in the curve of his hands. With a bit of flailing, she managed to right herself and settled against his skin like she belonged there. Alvis lifted her up, turning his palms into a stage and bringing her as close to eye-level as he could.

"You need a name," he told her. He'd spent months considering his options, reading dozens of books and finally settling on the perfect choice. "I'd like to call Nephele. Do you like it?"

She beamed at him. Newly dubbed Nephele, she rose to her feet again and balanced on the heels of his palm before reaching for his face with grabby hands. Alvis obliged her, propping his elbows on the desk and leaning in. Her hands found his nose, then his glasses.

Nephele stared at herself in the lenses, momentarily enraptured by her own reflection. Alvis took the opportunity to memorize her tiny features, up close and alive. He knew constructs. He's been surrounded by them his whole life, what with Faigel and the guarding trees and the plants in the lab. But a homunculus, created in human form with human DNA...that was different. That was special.

Of course, he'd known that going in. Even the greatest masters didn't create homunculi on a whim. Still, seeing it now, seeing her, brought it all into focus. Nephele seemed so much more now that her essence lived and her body breathed. Her spirit danced with his own, resonating on the same level as a parent and child. She was bright and new and beautiful and Alvis could not imagine that she came from him.

It must be Mara's influence, a strength of spirit passed down by blood. He'd known she was special. Meeting her had been a true gift.

While he was lost in admiration, Nephele finally tired of her own reflection. Her hands moved from glass to skin, prodding at the freckles that covered Alvis's nose. She poked at them, compared their color to her own, and frowned. Then she curled her tiny hand into a fist and bopped Alvis soundly on the nose.

"Ow!"

Alvis jerked back. Nephele went flying, getting six inches of air before landing back in his palms and dissolving into more laughter. Alvis rubbed his nose but -- finding no damage save a sore tip -- found himself chuckling right along with her. "You sure hit hard for a fairy."

Still giggling, Nephele slapped his palm with both hands. Even without a voice, Alvis knew exactly what she was saying: "Again! Again!"

"Oh no you don't." He started to lower her back to the desk, only to stop and scoop her to his chest as a thump echoed from the lower floor. In an instant, his mind catalogued all the background noises it'd been storing that he hadn't even realized he'd heard -- the rattling of the front door knob, a distant gunshot-bang, and the frantic rustling of the tree-constructs that guarded the path through the trees. They all came together at once, and he knew for certain what was going on:

Someone was on his island. Someone was in his home.

###

Alvis tried and failed to calm his racing nerves, a task that proved all the more difficult because Nephele immediately perked up at the prospect of more people, more auras, more life. She began wriggling in his hands and, try as he might, he couldn't keep her still without crushing her. She slipped free, grabbed his cuff link, and used it to swing herself into a low arch in the vague direction of the door.

"Neph--!" Alvis gasped, without the breath to say much more. He twisted to snatch her mid-air and immediately fell out of his seat, slumping to the hardwood like a rolled carpet. He lay with his head inches from the open door, pinning Nephele in his palms as he prayed that the intruder hadn't heard him fumble.

Through the smallest gap in the floor, he heard the doorknob rattle again, even louder than before. Then there was a clacking noise and the front door swung open, its heavy wood dragging against the much-abused foyer floor.

"See?" said a stranger's voice, one that rumbled low in a wide throat. "Easy."

"Do I want to know where you learned that?" asked a second voice. Like the first it was male, and unlike the first it seemed unburdened, soft and restrained.

"Probably not."

A third voice, indistinct, made a rustling sound - "Shuuuush!" -- and the intruders fell quiet. Alvis's lungs couldn't take it anymore and rebelled, forcing the air out in a shuddering gasp. In his hands, Nephele giggled like a tinkling bell and sucked in an entire lungful of her own, mimicking his struggle on a much smaller and much higher-pitched scale.

Alvis stayed on the floor until he heard footsteps leave the front hall. One set drifted down toward, past the stairs (thank god) and to the left, past his master's office and private quarters. The other two turned left just inside the door, moving into the Great Room.

Swift, but as soft as he could manage, Alvis scooped Nephele into the inside breast pocket of his labcoat -- the only one with a button. The homunculus gave an "Eep!" as she landed inside, then squawked in protest when the flap came down. He'd make it up to her later. For now, he needed her to be safe. He scooped up the eyeglass case full of prototypes and tucked his father's journal under his arm before easing open the door and slipping in stockinged feet onto the library landing.

He snuck to the banister, stayed low to the floor so he wouldn't be seen, and peered through the slats into the Great Room below. As he'd predicted, there were two people moving down there, though the dim light of mid-afternoon made them hard to see. They looked to be young -- teenagers? -- and of about the same height, though one had glasses and smooth hair while the other was broad, with curly hair and that odd deep voice. Their auras mixed with a comfortable familiarity.

So...curious. Not aggressive. Probably not bad people. They might even be nice. But they had also broken into his home. So he had no choice. He had to run, and he would only have one chance.

Careful as he could, Alvis eased open the glasses case on its old hinge and selected one of the prototype rods. Their glass was weak; they were meant to be snapped in half down the middle with relatively little force. Which meant that if he dropped one, chances were good that it would split.

Before he could hesitate, he lobbed the rod over the banister and let it drop into the room below.

He heard the soft chink of shattering glass only because he expected it; for others, it would be lost in the massive BANG! that followed.

Light and sound and force burst into the Great Room with a bellow of thunder. The intruders cried out in surprise and fear; by then, Alvis was already running. Hands clutched over Nephele's hiding place, he flew down the stairs and into the hall, his coat and clothes billowing around him in the aftermath of the lightning. If he could make it out the door and into the trees he'd be home free...

A body slammed into him from the right, small, dense and pure muscle. The third intruder. They slammed him into the wall, knocking an old painting to the floor. Alvis bucked, but his arms were pinned to his side. The intruder threw their entire weight onto him and sent them both crashing to the hallway floor.

Alvis wound up flat on his back, head bouncing off the wood and jarring the glasses from his nose. The intruder loomed over him like a predator, a wolf or a wolverine, full weight on her arms to keep him down while her legs straddled his waist. Her dark eyes, despite their folds, were wide with the rush of action. Her soft, short hair flew wild, seeming all the more bold for the green swath above the left side. Her coat, covered in safety-pinned patches, rattled softly with each pant.

If Alvis hadn't already been winded, he would have lost all his air. He knew exactly who this intruder was. Seeing her lifted a weight he hadn't wanted to admit he still carried.

Her lips curled up into a tense snarl. "Now listen here you son of a--"

"You're alive."

Despite himself, despite everything, Alvis's eyes flooded with tears.

Tamara Edenshaw stared down at him, her mouth twisted and her eyes narrowed, the wind of whatever she'd been about to say taken immediately from her sails.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mara liked to think of herself as adaptable. Independent. No matter what life threw her way, she ought to be able to adjust.

She did not know how to adjust to this.

The white kid was crying. He was clearly trying not to, blinking several times in rapid succession, but it wasn't working. He was also smiling, and it was a goofy smile, all thin and uncertain with his lips pressed together like he knew that it wasn't right. That he did all this while she had him pinned to the floor -- dishwater-blond mane and weird coat pooling around him -- just made the whole thing stranger.

A trick then. It had to be a ploy to throw her off her guard. He'd attacked her friends, he'd attacked her, and there was the patch on his coat, clear as day:



So there was no way she could let him up. No, she was going to keep him pinned until he told her exactly what the hell was going on, and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, that could change...

His coat squirmed under her hand.

Mara jumped a foot, which jarred the breath out of her captive and sent him into a coughing fit. The coat thumped against her palm until she lifted it and kept squirming after. Something inside wanted out.

She looked from it to the boy, still pinned by her legs at his waist and her other hand at his shoulder. She moved it to his collar bone, leaned into with her full weight, and muttered, "Don't move."

"Ah--!"

She pressed again, cutting him off in mid-squeak. Her free hand tugged open the coat to reveal a buttoned pocket. The instant she opened it, the flap flew up.

A tiny human face smiled at her from inside. Hands the size of sunflower seeds grasped at her fingers, pulling the body of a living doll from the cloth. It chirped at her like a baby bird.

In the split second that Mara froze in shock, the wee creature crawled up her hand and grabbed hold of her coat-sleeve. Mara yelped and leapt back, but the doll came with her. She flailed her arm and it giggled, even as it flopped about at the end of her wrist.

"Careful!" cried the stranger, lurching up from the floor. "Don't hurt her, please!"

Too late. A last snap of Mara's wrist sent the doll flying, flung so far straight up in the air that it would've hit the ceiling if they weren't standing directly under the stairs. It somersaulted, a tiny ball of curled limbs and flowing cloth, only to splay out at the peak of its flight and drop with arms and legs spread.

On instinct, Mara cupped her palms and lurched into a catch. It came right to her, bounced once on the energy of its decent, and sprawled across her joined life-lines with a riotous gasp.

The whole time it kept laughing, a chorus of tiny bells alive with sheer exhilaration. When Mara peered in, it peered back, lying upside-down with its head near the curve of her palm. Feather-light hair tickled her palms as it grinned. Its mouth was full of polished silver.

Yet, when it rolled over and cuddled up to her with its ear to her skin, she couldn't help the lurch of affection that stirred her heart.

Caden and Syd had recovered by this point, blinking the last of the flash-bomb away as they stepped from the main room. Pressing up a bit closer than necessary, Syd squinted down at the thing in Mara's hands.

"I must still be seeing things," he said. "Because that doll looks like it's moving."

"She *is* moving." The weird white kid twitched again, like he wanted nothing more to snatch the creature back but didn't dare risk the attempt. "She's not a doll, she's alive. Please, be gentle."

Mara scowled at him, putting her back to the corridor wall and holding the little thing well out of his reach. Taking a cue from her body language, Caden stepped to the white kid's opposite side; non-threatening, but blocking his path to the door. She opened her hands enough to present the doll at a distance and fixed the weirdo with her most threatening glare.

"Explain. Now."

He actually whimpered, but nodded nonetheless. At least he understood that he didn't have a choice.

#####

His name was Alvis Norling, which wasn't the whitest name she'd ever heard but it did seem... off, somehow. Even he seemed to know it. He hesitated before making introductions and nearly choked at the end, like he wasn't used to saying it out-loud.

Though he'd been let up, he made no move to stand, instead sitting cross-legged on the hardwood hallway floor. Weird of him, when there was a room full of chairs barely three steps away, but whatever. Mara stayed with him, keeping the doll-thing close at hand for insurance, which was easy enough -- it seemed perfectly happy to snuggle at her pulse-point and coo like baby bird. On the kid's other side, Caden took a knee, blocking the route between him and the door. And Syd sat on the stairs, rubbing the cut on his injured knee.

"Are you, ah, hurt?" asked Alvis, his tongue sliding nervously across thin lips. "I could fix it."

Syd snorted. "Yeeeeaaaah, no. Had enough freaky magic for one day."

"It's not magic. It's alchemy."

A raised eyebrow from Syd communicated Mara's exact thought: that there wasn't much of a difference. Alvis actually pouted.

"Alchemy is science, the sacred science. It's natural, it's just--"

"Natural?" Mara snorted. She cupped hands, the doll rolling across her palms at the sudden lurch. "This is not natural. That--" She pointed at the shattered glass on the library floor. "--wasn't natural. Moving trees, stone vines, none of this is natural! You--"

Caden cleared his throat. Alvis had cringed from her raised voice, one first curled in his own hair. Mara deflated. Her guilt gnawed. She sighed.

"Fine. Whatever. Not magic." She crouched, putting herself back on his level and careful not to jostle the doll. "So, you're an alchemist."

"Apprentice."

She raised an eyebrow. Alvis peaked up at her, fingers easing the grip on his hair. His eyes were a weird green, pale and washed-out like classy booze. Too pale.

He shrugged the shoulder with the cross-circle patch, as though that meant anything. "I-I'm just an apprentice. My uchitel'..." He stopped and shook his head, searching for the right word. "My teacher is the alchemist, technically. A master."

"Okay." She held out the small creature. "So what's this?"

She'd been thinking of it as a doll, but now that she'd calmed down and gotten a chance to actually look at the thing, the aptness of description took her by surprise. It looked like Tlingt Barbie, all copper-dark skin and black hair over the invisible cheeks and tiny nose of a white girl. Scrawny and lithe, there was something wrong with its joints. They gleamed copper-green and seemed smaller than the surrounding arms, though the concentrated uncanny of such a small but otherwise perfect human figure kept her from looking much closer.

It turned towards Alvis with a curious blink. He smiled back. His gentle features softened by pure love stoked an unwelcome flame in Mara's gut.

"Nephele."

"Try again."

"She's a homunculus. A construct, a..." He shook his head as though clearing water from his ears and started again as though reciting from a book. "Construct: A semi-organic life form seeded in existing genetic material, layered over pre-fashioned skeletal frames."

"Like the vines?" Caden held up the burnt leaf fragment, which had all but crumpled in their flight to the house.

"Yes. And the trees." Alvis glanced to each of them -- Caden, Mara, and Syd -- in turn, before anxiously adjusting his glasses and holding out a tentative hand. "I...could show you."

Mara hesitated, but only a second. It wasn't like he could run. Besides, keeping the thing felt like ransoming a pet hamster.

She tipped it -- her -- into his palms. 'Nephele' rolled head-over-heels, perfectly content to be passed between them like a toy. With a few nudges and a whisper in what sounded like Russian, Alvis had her standing on his palms and stretching to show off the bend of her joints.

They were, Mara now saw, not just copper-green but literally made of copper. Her elbows and shoulders were held together with watch screws, tied up in intricate metal knots that mimicked the move of real joints.

"See? She's brand-new. Just born. She hasn't had the chance to fill in her gaps yet."

Syd gave a low, impressed whistle. His robotics geek was showing. "Damn, dude. That's...pretty cool."

Caden hummed, a similarly thoughtful noise, though by Mara's reckoning he didn't know any more about the construction than she did. She'd guess he was judging the craftsmanship of the makeshift dress, which was truly shoddy. Little doll needed better clothes.

No, wait. Stupid. She shook off the thought and focused instead on what was important. "Why does she look like me?"

"Oh. That's because. Um." What little confidence Alvis had withered as he tucked Nephele close, watching Mara with careful, watery eyes. "How much do you remember?"

"Well, let's see. I remember you. I remember this house. I remember getting smacked by a tree. And then I remember passing out for a week with a hundred-degree fever." Mara glared.

"That because of you?"

"... Yes."

She slammed her flat hand into the wall by his head, deliberately missing his ear by a thread. Nephele shrieked and ducked into the safety of Alvis's sleeve while the boy babbled.

"I'm sorry I'm sorry! I didn't mean to, I swear!"

"Didn't mean to what?" Mara growled.

"To hurt you. I didn't know you'd be there. On the road, I was just...you came out of nowhere!"

A memory flitted across Mara's thoughts, ghost-pale and vague. She saw the path through the woods, smelled the all-too-close vine, felt the burn of her legs pushing the pedals to full speed only to slam on the brakes when a shadow darted, deer-like, into her path. She'd caught a glimpse of those pale green eyes and then she'd flown, thrown off by the screeching halt. The brow above her left eye stung with the ghost of pain.

Pale eyes darted, as though predicting her thoughts through calculation of every twitch on her face. "You got hurt and I...I panicked. And then you chased me."

Bleeding, bleeding, on her feet. Across the bridge and running...yes.

She drew back her hand, anger dying into guilty embers. "I was mad."

"I was scared," said Alvis. Now that she'd withdrawn he uncurled again, hesitantly. "B- But then you hit one of the traps, this...th-this smoke thing. Causes confusion. And I, I thought. Well. I wanted to fix it, t-to fix you. And I was looking for blood anyway so..."

"Hold up." Syd held up a broad palm, looking vaguely sick. "You wanted blood?"

Alvis nodded miserably.

"You a vampire too?"

"I--no. Not for me. For her." Alvis gestured to the sleeve, from which Nephele was watching like a startled cat. "To finish her. I...only needed a few drops. So I just..." He tapped his forehead with two free fingers and shrugged. "Easy. Except...the medicine I used went bad. I swear, I didn't know! I thought I'd killed you."

"Well you didn't," said Mara, crossing her arms and settling back on her heels. "You just stole my blood. To make that."

"Yes. B-But she's not a perfect copy. I mean, she's not just you. I used my blood, too. So she'd be herself."

That...hm. That took some puzzling out. An awkward silence fell as the three non-alchem-whatevers considered the implications. Then Syd began snickering.

"Ooooh. So what he's saying is..." He tried and failed to hide his smirk behind his hand. "Congratulations, Mara. You're a mother."

"Father," said Caden. He sounded far too calm, which meant he'd stepped back and dissociated to prevent getting too involved. "In this context, I'm pretty sure she's the father."

Mara elbowed him, feeling her ears begin to burn. Alvis looked bewildered, so before he could catch on to the joke Mara grabbed his jacket, right above the patch "What about this?"

"My...coat?"

Nephele crawled from his sleeve, once more grabbing for the button at Mara's wrist. Without looking, Mara offered the 'construct' her opposite hand and curved her palm to make a comfortable perch. "The patch. What's it mean?"

Alvis considered her a moment, growing thoughtful now that she'd stopped being quite so violently mad. He seemed to mull it over for over a minute before answering slowly, "It depends

on the context. Generally, it's the sign for *nigredo*, the black phase. The first step of any alchemical process."

He brushed his fingertips over the worn patch, then reached behind him to pull out an old book bound in black leather. Mara had forgotten in the chaos, but he'd carried it down the stairs and apparently landed on it, keeping it hidden the whole time. The same symbol had been embossed on the spine, looking almost like an afterthought compared to the larger glyph on its face.

"Wearing it shows that I'm still an apprentice. But as it's used here, it's like a title -- this is volume one of three."

For a split second, burning curiosity overwhelmed Mara's other concerns. "Volume one of what?"

"My father's Great Work."

Her concern softened further, bending under the weight the words carried unlike all those that had come before. Alvis grew soft again, but not out of warmth. It felt more like an old, unhealed bruise.

The boys seemed to clue in too, with Caden glancing between Alvis and Mara as though they were pieces in a puzzle. Syd dug the smart phone from his pocket and held it out to Alvis, its screen filled with his photographs of the trophy hall. "And in this context?"

Pulled from his thoughts, Alvis frowned. He tilted his head at the screen, adjusted his glasses again by the hinge, and leaned in for a closer look. The confusion he wore only grew more intense. "It's nonsense. Complete chaos. What a mess." Glancing at Syd for permission, he carefully lifted the device from his palm and brought it close for a better look. When Syd reached to swipe to the next image, he jumped a foot. "Ah--! Oh. W-Where is that?"

"Our school."

"Mount Vilna?" He shrugged sheepishly at Mara's blank look. "You left your ID on the road."

Mara made a mental note to deal with that later and tapped Syd's phone to bring attention back to the screen. "Anyway. This mess? Caused a lot of trouble. Jackass principal blamed me. So I need to find who did it. Was it you?"

"It couldn't be. I never leave the island."

"Except to go blood hunting," said Cay.

Pale cheeks flushed cherry-red. "That was one time." "What's this it's covered in? Paint?"

Shaking her head, Mara moved Nephele into her off-hand and dug the used bandanna from her pocket. The blob she'd wiped off her fingers remained sticky and wet. "It's this."

Alvis returned Syd's phone before taking the unfolded cloth. As he brought it close to his face, his brows twitched with something like recognition. He sniffed it. His nose wrinkled. The familiarity remained.

Despite herself, Mara felt a rush. "You know what it is?"

"Not exactly." Alvis made a thoughtful noise, at last pulling himself from the floor. "But I've got a decent guess."

#####

Back on his feet, Alvis took only a moment to straighten his coat and layered clothes before gathering up his father's journal and, with a shy nod towards the house's heart, leading them out of the hallway. They crossed first through large main room with its large windows and

overlooking balcony filled with bookshelves, side-stepped a table holding the oddest chess set Mara had ever seen (the board had three colors, laid out like bricks in a wall) and ducked into a second hall that passed a kitchen and an office as it stretched towards the building's rear. Large as it had seemed to loom from the outside, Mara was almost surprised at how normal the rooms they passed seemed, though nearly all were cluttered with boxes and mess as though they were hardly lived in at all.

That all changed when they reached the door at the end of the hall, which bore a simple bronze plaque etched with the word "Lab" in simple script. It opened up into a chamber that seemed, from the inside, to be at least as large, if not larger, than any they'd seen before. Wide windows covered its two outer walls, bringing in a shocking amount of natural light given how most of the glass was covered by thick green vines both inside and out. The back wall lead to a small greenhouse, and then to a wide-open space of trees and grass until it ended in a sudden drop of sea at a lonely dock.

Both greenhouse and lab seemed to be heated by the same source: a massive stone structure that seemed at once to be an oven, a fireplace, a furnace, and a stove, from which rose both a single flue big enough for Mara to crawl into and an entire network of pipes that ran along support beams and between the winding curls of vines. It had iron doors on every side, one of which had a window open to show the fire burning quietly inside. Glass vessels bubbled on burners along its top.

Any wall-space that remained between pipes, vines, and windows held shelves, each loaded almost to the limit with strange things. One held dozens of solid glass orbs, completely sealed, each of which contained an impossibly-burning flame in an entire spectrum of colors. Another carried bones, some natural white and others made completely or partially of various

metals, and yet another sealed bottles, racks of corked tubes, and a number of bulging glass jars, all of which contained some liquid or powder or dried leaf behind labels that bore those strange alchemical symbols. Beneath the shelves lay cabinets and chests, workbenches and tabletops, different styles but all seemingly carved from the same wood. Some bore marble tabletops or wheels, others nearly sagged under the weight of glassware and tubes that formed nets as complex as any city. A few stood empty, waiting to be filled up and used.

Nephele, who had been moved from Mara's hand to a safer perch on her shoulder, cooed into Mara's ear and craned her little head back to peer up at the green-glass skylights overhead. Mara barely held herself back from doing the same. This place had no order, no sense of structure or place, yet it seemed peaceful. Like a messy but familiar bedroom, waiting for its owner to return.

"So...the black phase," said Alvis with a slight cough. "I may have mentioned it before?"

He cast a curious glimpse Mara's way, as though he half-wanted to take back Nephele, but when the construct didn't budge from her perch he lead them on. He seemed almost to swell as he did, growing in confidence and ease like a blooming flower.

Mara felt the opposite. Despite the peace of the room and its wide-open space, something pressed on her -- a low hum in the back of her mind.

"All alchemical processes -- literal, practical, metaphorical -- follow the same three broad major steps." He counted them out on his fingers, steering the group towards an odd stone basin nestled in the far-back corner. "Nigredo, albedo, rubedo. Black, white, red. The black phase means destruction. The breaking down of components to their most basic states. Usually via fire, and the athanor." He tipped his head towards the furnace before Syd could ask and knocked

twice on the stone edge of the basin, where he'd come to stand. "But there is something to be said for a more natural approach and for that, we have the digester."

He undid a latch on the edge of the lid, then paused.

"You might to want to stand back."

Syd and Caden, who had approached almost on Alvis's heels, backed off by several steps. Mara stood right behind him, one hand raised on instinct to shield Nephele. The little doll now stood on her shoulder, peering over her fingers for a look of her own.

Alvis took a deep breath, set sample aside, and screwed up his face before throwing back the lid. A putrid scent burst forth, so thick and hot that it seemed to bend the air. A high keening grated Mara's eardrums and she cringed back, bizarrely mirrored by the nearest vines, which wound themselves up to duck behind the safety of window glass.

Syd reeled back with a curse, bumping into a worktable and rattling its glassware as he did. Caden held his ground, but yanked a sleeve over his hand and pressed it to his mouth and nose. "What the hell is that?"

"A decade's worth of rotting waste matter. Plus certain concoctions to encourage complete putrefaction." Alvis, despite his calm tone, seemed to have almost stopped breathing -- his lips were pursed and his chest barely rose. He plucked a small, empty jar off the nearby shelf and dipped it into the basin, without letting his arm touch the walls. It came back half-filled with an oily, mostly-black slime. "Look familiar?"

Mara only nodded, unwilling to lower her hand until the jar was capped and the digester lid re-sealed. Alvis wiped down his hands before collecting both the jar-slime and the bandanna as though what he'd just done was standard procedure. "Your sample isn't very big, but I could do a quick comparison to confirm any similarities."

Caden cleared his throat, trading a quick glance with Mara. They shared the same thought: Why not? "Compare away."

Still leaning into the worktop, Syd croaked an exaggerated gag.

As Alvis set about doing something with the weird city of glassware, Mara drifted with Syd towards a cracked window through which the chill, fresh afternoon air steadily swept the smell from the room. Nephele -- who, in the face of big peoples' reaction, had only revived her giggles as though watching a funny show -- made an attempt to grab hold of a vine, but Mara held her back. She didn't trust the way the vines moved on their own, squirming across the window like a living carpet. The faint scrape of their leaves on glass made her ears want to bleed.

Of course, she also didn't know why she bothered to protect the small creature. Construct. Homunculus, whatever. She had no reason to care, and yet her instincts flared, they way they would to protect a kitten or a stranger's baby. That her wide, eager eyes and bright, trusting smile stirred memories of Hana -- Mara's baby sister, back home in Keijin -- didn't help, nor did the nerves that continued to tighten even as she cleared the stench from her lungs.

Whatever had got her, the boys didn't notice. Syd had already retreated from the window, wandering back towards where Caden was watching Alvis work. Hands in his pockets, Syd sidled up to the pair with exaggerated nonchalance.

"So, uh," he said, subtle as ever. "I might regret asking this, but if Mara was blood-donation baby daddy Plan B, what was Plan A?"

"Oh, uh..." Without looking up from the bulb he'd just placed over the fire, Alvis gestured vaguely to a stack of the Latea Ledger that waited under a nearby desk. "I'd, um. Read about a place in town. A blood bank? I thought I might go there."

"And what, take out a loan?"

Syd laughed at his own joke, a bit too long and a bit too loud, especially when no one else joined in. Eventually, once Alvis hunched his shoulders in an attempt to hide yet another rising blush, Sydney clued in and calmed to a nervous, bewildered stare.

"That's not how a blood bank works, buddy."

"Well, I didn't know..."

"How long have you been here?"

The question came from Mara, but it sounded strange to her own ears. The pressure kept coming, pressing down on her eardrums, and the hum -- from the pipes? The ventilation, or the fire? -- continued to rise, pushing out everything else until even her own words seemed to come from a distance.

The boys remained unaffected. Alvis only shrugged. "My whole life."

He seemed determined now not to look up from his work, eyes steadily focused on a matching pair of boiling liquids even as he reached for the two sludge samples and missed. Caden, who'd been hovering nearby and watching the entire process, nudged the two fragments into his reach. "And you never leave the island?" he pressed. Alvis nodded. "Are you always alone?"

"Not all the time. There's my master, his construct Faigel. And Nephele, now."

Mara rubbed at her ear, but the ringing continued. Her gaze fell to the workbench nearest her window, where Alvis had set down his things, including the journal. Its embossed cover stood out especially well in the angled light.

"And your father?"

Alvis bit his lip. "He was here, once. But I never knew him. All I have is that book."

Mara opened the journal, grasping for any thought that might distract her. Tucked into the inside cover was a faded old photo of a man, perhaps mid-twenties, with wavy hair and ghostly eyes. Under it, a neat script etched the name "Orvar Norling."

He seemed familiar, somehow. Though she couldn't put her finger on why.

"Okay, so. From what I can tell, the sample's mostly plants with some meat, mixed heavily with mud and..."

SMASH!

Mara whipped around just in time to dodge the snapping whip of window-vines thrusting towards her like a single living beast. They struck the air, barely missing her retreat and knocking a second beaker to the floor. Nephele clung to Mara's collar even as her little feet scrambled in an attempt to retreat.

In the same moment, the pressure in Mara's ears shattered into a voiceless, impossible scream. She covered her ears and sank to her knees. No good. It grew only stronger, threatening to rip her mind apart from the inside.

"What in the--"

"Mara!" Caden cut off Syd in mid-swear and made it three steps across the room before Alvis, with surprising speed, caught his sleeve. He said something, she could tell because his lips moved, but she couldn't hear. The scream drowned out everything, even Nephele's voice from her own shoulder. God, were her ears bleeding?

A hand on her arm. Alvis. He knelt before her, holding to one of the fire orbs from the window. Its impossible flame flickered a soft auroral white-green.

"Mara," he said, low and slow enough for her to read his lips. "Mara, listen to me."

He took her wrist and gently tugged the hand from her ear. She pulled back, but the sound had worked its way down to her nerves and her arms shook so bad they couldn't resist. Alvis shushed her in a way that would have been soothing at any other time, using his thumb to massage her hand.

"It's okay. It's okay. They don't mean to hurt you."

Crazy. He had to be crazy. What else could they mean?

Alvis offered a gentle smile and tipped the orb into her palm. The flame it contained flared up, blazing ever brighter from the moment it brushed her skin. It should have burned or broken, but...no. It just blazed, wild and strong.

"You burn," said Alvis, holding closing his hands around hers and the orb. "That's a threat to them, to plants, and when they fight back you keep burning. But if you just calm down it'll stop. So..." He lifted their hands, pushing the fire into her line of sight. It burned without heat, licking hungrily at their palms. "Watch the fire. Listen to my voice. And breathe. In."

He took a deep breath, lifting his shoulders and filling his lungs. Mara answered with a breath of her own, gradually matching his slow rhythm. In. Hold. Out. In. Hold. Out.

The vines rustled as though in a fierce wind and the screaming pressed roofing nails into her skull. Yet, as she focused on the breathing, she started to see how the flame in the orb gradually began to flare and empty in the same pattern. The tiny hands at her cheek told her that Nephele was cheering her on, too.

Alvis's eyes slid closed. He began to whisper in a language she didn't understand, each line on a separate exhale: "Quod est inferius est sicut quod est superius. Et quod est superius est sicut quod est inferius. Ad perpetranda miracula rei unius..."

Mara had never been one for prayer, and she knew somehow that this wasn't the same. Yet, it helped. Her mind cleared. Her senses calmed. The scream gradually died and the vines relaxed, returning to their comfortable coils against the window glass.

The next time Mara opened her eyes -- and, huh. She hadn't even noticed she closed them -- the first thing she laid eyes on was the flame in the orb, flickering now as soft and steady as a candle. The second was Alvis, staring at her in undisguised wonder.

"You're amazing," he whisper.

She blinked. His pale face immediately flushed red.

"Oh! I. Uh. Sorry. It's just..." He took back the fire orb and began rolling it between his palms. "This didn't happen two weeks ago, you weren't awake then, s-so for your Quintessence to build to this level so quickly is, it's amazing and..." He stopped in mid-sentence again and keened like a wounded cat. "And it's all my fault. I'm so sorry."

"Alchemy is, at its most basic, a science--"

"You said that already."

Caden elbowed Syd hard in the side.

"A *science*," continued Alvis. "Of manipulating the Fifth Element. The essence of all things, the raw being of creation. The Quintessence." "Everything has it and it's strongest in living, sentient beings. All alchemical techniques are about harnessing this element and putting it to use. But. You have to be able to sense it first, and humans aren't built for that. So instead, what you have to do is strength your personal Quintessence, your aura, until it's able to identify, react to, and act upon the surrounding forces of other things. That gets processed through the other senses -- one often stronger than the rest -- and it usually takes years of dedicated study and

meditation. B-But I've heard..." He swallowed. "I've heard that, sometimes, it can get jump-started by...by nearly dying. Which means."

He stopped, taking a deep breath that trembled like waves on the shore.

"I almost killed you. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," she said.

And, to her own surprise, it really was.

#

So this, in the end, was how the arrangement was made: Alvis and Mara, Caden and Syd sat on the floor of the main room ("Great Room," Alvis called it), sharing a bag of trail mix from the kitchen stash and comparing stories of the last two weeks. The slime may have just been rotten goo, but it plus the symbols -- what Alvis called glyphs -- were too much of a coincidence to be ignored.

(Syd still insisted on rumors of the "Mount Vilna Thing," but these were offered up only in jest -- whoever had done this was much too solid to be a ghost story.)

Once he got the full story, Alvis shyly offered his assistance in investigating anything unusual they found. Though they had only his word, Mara found herself inclined to believe his sincerity after everything he'd said and done and shown. In exchange, he asked for nothing, but the whole time he cradled his father's "Great Work" in his lap, wistfully tracing the shape on the front of the tome.

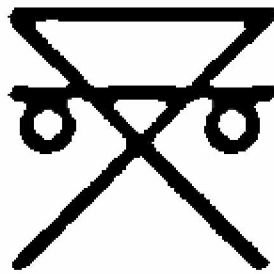
It was sunset by the time the three students at last gathered their things and retreated back across the island. Though Nephele cried at being taken from Mara's knee (prompting many a

joke about missing her 'Papa,') there was peace to be found as Alvis walked the group to the bridge. He lingered there as he crossed, watching them go. Returning Syd's wave just before they slipped away.

Mara was the last to cross, turning back at the final step to catch a glimpse of the strange boy who'd put her through so much as he vanished back into the trees. From here, it was easy to believe, as she always had, that this island stood empty. That this whole day, the whole two weeks, had all been a long and strange dream. But if she closed her eyes and listened, she could hear the soft whisper of life in the trees and the waves and on the distant winds. It was awareness and sentience unlike anything she'd known before. And it was completely, undeniably real.

That, at least, was something she could hold onto in the weeks to come.

PART TWO



CHAPTER EIGHT

"Everyone ready?"

A smattering of "yes's" and "yes sirs" answered Mr. Petrov's call, students chiming in from the kayaks around the crowded dock. Mara joined in as an afterthought, already poised to launch with her hands tight around the double-headed paddle. It'd been over a month since she last took to water. Far too long.

"All right then." Mr. Petrov pushed his boat away from the dock and pulled ahead, his wife and fellow staff escort following close behind. "Keep together now. We'll take a lap around the harbor first. Shout if you see anything interesting."

A dozen student-powered boats -- solo kayaks and a few multi-student canoes -- followed their teachers from the MVH dock and into the Latea Sound. It took Mara three strokes to find her old rhythm; after that, her paddle cut through the water with ease.

It was Friday, the fourth of the month, and for the Mount Vilna boarders that meant an afternoon off for activities with their "Vilna Kin," an assigned cluster of a dozen or so students under the supervision of a particular adviser. At freshman orientation, they'd been told that their

assigned Kin would be a "surrogate family" while at school, meant to provide "support and community" to students living away from home for the first time. In reality, it mostly meant awkward potlucks, forced get-togethers, and that a particular teacher would be held responsible for the antics of a problem student.

Still, Mara couldn't complain, not when the Petrovs arranged outings like this. As they pull away from the school, she reveled in the burn that crept up her arms. With nothing around them but other boats and a few small islands. The open water stood nearly still in the quiet Latea Sound.

This weekend could be their last chance to take the kayaks out before winter came. Most birch trees looked ready to dump their golden leaves and the wind off the mountains carried a taste of cold like bitter mint. Even the migrating animals from birds to whales were long gone, leaving only the stubborn local breeds to put on the excess fat and buckle down for the cold.

Before she knew it, Mara pulled ahead and away from the group, coming on too strong and fast as Petrov called for her to stay close. She doubled back and slowed down, pulling up alongside Caden and Syd, who'd gotten stuck in a two-person canoe with Silena and a small ice chest riding as cargo. Silena scowled from the depths of an orange life vest. Mara made it a point to ignore her.

"Nice day, huh?" Syd panted between his words, skin already shining with sweat. "Not too cold. Just. Brisk."

Caden caught Mara's eye and smiled fondly, shaking his head. Mara forgot sometimes that not everyone grew up learning to travel by water. Syd was probably using muscles he hadn't even know existed.

The Kin idled along past the northern tip of Metharme, giving the part a wide berth yet keeping close to the islands to avoid the fishing trawlers and speedboats. To the east, the city lay eerily quiet with all the summer workers gone. The larger pointers were still fishing, but the private sail boats and day-tour skimmers had been battened down and moored to await the coming cold.

She wondered what Alvis was doing today, if he knew the winter was coming and understood why the city went quiet. If he knew, did Nephele? Were they lonely, all by themselves on that stupid rock?

The canoe drifted ahead, Caden putting in some extra power to pull himself about even with Mara. "You okay?"

Mara shook herself, picking up the rhythm she'd dropped. "Yeah. I'm fine."

She caught Silena trying to watch them, but she couldn't turn too far around without the risk of overturning their boat, and Mara wasn't sure the other girl could swim. She dropped her voice and muttered so only Caden could hear, "We still don't have a lead."

She didn't say that it'd been three days since they met Alvis and Nephele; that the trophy hall remained devastated and off-limits; and that everyone outside their group continued to whisper behind her back in the halls. They'd found nothing on Alvis's dad, nothing new about the vandalism, and nothing about any rogue alchemists living in the school.

Caden knew all that and could read the frustration in her silence. "You know things like this take time."

Mara frowned. All things took time. That didn't make it any less frustrating.

From the harbor's edge, the Kin moved into the deeper part of the Sound, well away from the bustle of the city harbor. Here, dozens of smaller islands dotted the sea, some barely more

than a cluster of stones and others large enough to contain neighborhoods. Several held only a single grand house with a private dock and "No trespassing" signs standing dark with their rich owners flown south for the winter.

But the one that caught Mara's eye was smaller, a formation of jagged gray rocks with only a few weak trees clinging to its peak. One spruce towered over the rest, right at the very top, but it looked as though it had been struck by lightning. Its bark was burnt to a crisp and its branches were barren.

Mara drifted closer, trying to get a look at the blackened tree. It was hard to judge its height from so far down, but as near as she could tell it must have been both massive and very dead. There couldn't be much soil up there, so how could it stand so straight in all this wind?

"Be careful."

Mara jumped, her kayak rocking. She lurched to keep her balance. Mrs. Elsa steadied her boat with one hand, having slid in alongside Mara after Caden and Syd pulled ahead unseen. She chuckled and offered Mara apology before inclining her head towards the island.

"Don't get too close to that one. That's where the qalupalik lives."

Mara cocked her head. The word sounded familiar, but her Inupiat was too limited to place it. "The what?"

Mrs. Elsa hummed to herself, casting a glimpse towards the rest of the boats. She might have been looking for her husband, but Mr. Petrov was busy pointing out local landmarks to the freshman and shouting down Danny Goto when he tried to paddle off chasing terns. "That's what my grandmother would have called it, anyway. Or perhaps a 'urayuli.' Here, though, I believe the proper term is...kóoshdakáa."

An involuntary shudder rolled up Mara's spine.

Kóoshdakáa. She hadn't heard that word years, not since her father reasoned her too old to be scared by fairytale monsters. But that didn't mean the fear was gone. The land-otter men were among her father's favorite campfire tales, an ancient race who'd stalked the Tlingit for generations before meeting the white men. Kóoshdakáa were shape-shifters, or maybe they had human torsos and otter legs, or maybe it was both, but one way or another they lured careless sailors and curious children alike to a watery grave.

They were only stories. Mara knew that now. And yet...

"That's the rumor, anyway." Mrs. Elsa grinned, apparently enjoying the pallor that overtook Mara's face. "Some say they've seen a thing on that island, dangling off the rocks. Others claim it snatches fish from trawler nets. The currents out here can get rough, but despite that they say you can sometimes see a shadow swimming just below the surface, human-shaped but faster than any human should be able to move."

A whistle sounded from the head of the group, Mr. Petrov was calling the Kin. They'd reached the edge of the harbor now and were going to double around the little island to head back the other way before settling into a park on the north side of town for lunch. Mrs. Elsa signaled with her hand to show that the instructions had been received and lifted her paddle to follow her husband's lead.

"They're only stories, of course," she said, patting Mara's kayak before they could drift apart. "But it's fun to think about. A little adventure."

She paddled off, arcing to herd in the stragglers who threatened to drift in the stronger currents and catch that idiot Goto before he got himself into trouble. Mara likewise steered her kayak to turn around, but as they rounded the "kóoshdakáa's" rock, she did a double-take.

The island's northern side jutted straight from the sea, towering a good twenty feet over her head. At its highest point stood the blackened tree, straight as ever in spite of everything. And there, with the sun shining, if she looked just right...yes. She could definitely see it: a sigil, carved into the burnt bark, where something metallic glinted in the light. It was the same symbol that had been on Alvis's coat.

The sign of the Black Phase.



CHAPTER NINE

"Nephele, no!"

If things had been different – if Alvis had moved faster, or noticed the danger a few seconds before – then the day might have been saved. Instead, the home-blown pelican glass tumbled from its high shelf and shattered on the lab floor, tubes splintered and bulbs reduced to shards that flew in all directions.

Nephele wobbled on the shelf's edge, toes poised at the tip and arms flailing. She fell. Alvis dove to catch her and managed to scoop her up right before she hit the floor. The glass cut his hands, drawing blood.

He groaned. "Now look what you've done."

Nephele peered over his fingers at the mess of glass. She craned her head back and smiled at her creator, all white metal teeth and beaming pride.

"No, it's not good." Alvis picked himself up, sitting cross-legged on the floor and carefully shook the glass out of his cuffs. "My teacher made that. Now I'll have to explain why it's broken. I'll be in trouble."

Nephele's smile fell, replaced by a trembling lip and watering eyes. Alvis sighed.

"Of course I'm not mad. You scared me." He tipped Nephele into one hand and picked a final shard from the opposite palm. "Look. You liked that glass because it was pretty, right?"

Nephele nodded. Her language comprehension grew stronger by the day. Her curiosity even more so. She'd started a collection of tiny, pretty things that she kept in her "room" in Alvis's bedside drawer.

"But now it's not pretty anymore." Alvis scooped a few shards into his other palm and rattled them at her. "It's been reduced to this. It's gone, it's not coming back, and to top it off, you're hurt."

Nephele looked from the glass to her own body, finally noticing the long cut on her bare leg. She prodded, drawing blood, then lifted her hand to the light to examine the red now staining her palm.

"That's blood," said Alvis, rising to his feet. "It means you're hurt. That's bad. That's why you can't go breaking things, okay? You'll get hurt again."

Nephele continued to pout, but at least the way she glared at her bare feet seemed properly reprimanded. Alvis gave his coat a shake to make sure it was clear of glass, then carried her into the kitchen to patch them both up and fetch a broom.

He'd just finished sweeping up the broken glass when a knock sounded at the window. Alvis went stiff, dropping the dustpan into the bin for recycled glass. The crash it made caused the breath to catch in his throat. Nephele, perked up instantly, but he caught her before she could

leap off the nearby table. He clutched her close and hunched over, trying to keep them both unseen.

The knock came again. When he dared to look, he found a familiar face pressed against the glass.

"Alvis!" Mara demanded, knocking again. "Open up!"

Alvis released the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Feeling foolish, he let Nephele climb onto his shoulder and ducked through the greenhouse to the back door.

By the time he got there, Mara was back on the stoop and looking exceptionally smug. "Finally."

"You scared me half to death," Alvis muttered as he undid the lock and stepped back to let her in. She wore a heavy hunting coat today, as opposed to the light denim she'd had during the week. In truth, Alvis was happy to see her. He'd thought about about her a lot these last few days. Still, he tried to scowl as he closed the door. It came off as more of a pout. "What are you doing here? You can't just stop by, my master..."

"Won't be home for days." Mara swiped a hand through the creeping vines, startling them into a mass recoil. She grinned. "You said so yourself."

"What if he'd come back early?"

"Does he do that?"

Alvis fidgeted. "No."

"Then we're fine."

Nephele chirped from his shoulder, kicking her legs and reaching for Mara with grabby hands. Mara lit up with a smile, which warmed something in Alvis's chest.

"Hey there, little séék'. Come see your papa."

Nephele answered immediately, leaped off Alvis with a ringing cheer. Her muscles had developed well, giving her the strength to jump three times her own height and swing twice that distance with a decent hook. It let her get into all sorts of trouble and made leaping the distance between them easy.

She landed in Mara's outstretched palms, then immediately leapt to scale the buttons of her coat. Mara tucked her head in so the little homunculi could nuzzle up to her cheek like a kitten.

Alvis's weak attempt at a glare dissolved into a fond smile. "Did you come to see her?"

"No." Mara tickled Nephele's stomach and settled the construct on her shoulder, where the tiny creation could play with her hair. "I'm here for you. Figured you could use some warning before the guys pick us up."

"Excuse me?"

Mara dug into her coat pockets, fumbling with things that rattled and clanged. If it were anyone else, Alvis would guess that she didn't hear him, since his words came out as as more of a squeak. With her, though, he knew better.

"Here."

She tossed him a black plastic rectangle with rounded corners and a grid of numbed squares. It beeped when Alvis caught it, top half lighting up a soft green. He nearly dropped it again in shock.

"For you," said Mara, turning a wrist as though to brush aside his non-existent thanks.

"It's prepaid, plenty of minutes, few hundred text. Should work in-town no problem."

Alvis turned the thing over, bewildered that the light didn't come with an accompanying warmth. "What is it?"

"Cell phone."

Oh. Like in the news ads. "But why..."

"So we can call you, duh." Mara held up another rectangle, which looked like the one Syd carried. It looked nothing like Alvis's. For one, it had no buttons, and appeared to be almost entirely screen. "We'll all trade info. Let you know we're coming. Stuff like that."

At last, it dawned on him. This was a connection to the outside world.

Alvis clutched to the gift, afraid it might slip loose and shatter like the glass. This was a way to the others, to contact his friends. He had friends, and he had a way to talk to them whenever he wanted. Tears welled in his eyes. He had to blink rapidly to keep them from falling.

If Mara noticed, she was kind enough not to mention it. "Anyway. Grab your stuff, we have to go."

Alvis stayed frozen on the spot. He still couldn't quite wrap his head around today's purpose. "...go?"

"We've got a lead." Mara pocketed her phone and lifted Nephele from her shoulder, setting the homunculi in a cleared workspace and pulling up a stool to sit with her. "Little island to the north. There's something there worth checking out."

Waves tossed in Alvis's stomach, nerves and anxiety taking over his system. "And...you want me to go?"

Mara shot him a look. Without words, her eyes read, "Duh."

Alvis weakly held up his new phone. "Can't you take pictures?"

Mara shook her head, gesturing vaguely at the lab, the athanor, the orbs of colored fire on the window. "You're the expert. You'll see things we won't."

"But...I can't go. I have rules."

A strange expression flitted across Mara's face, one that Alvis couldn't quite pin with an emotion. It didn't help that his own feelings were going crazy. This could be his one and only chance to actually see the outside world for himself, get a real look at the city he's only ever glimpsed before. He'd be an idiot to turn this down. But when he thought of the crowd and the noise and all the people with their mass of mixed quintessence and the possibility of hidden traps or spies...

"I can't go into town," he said again, staring at his feet. "People can't know about me."

Mara's quintessence burst, a tongue of anger lashing like a solar flare. Alvis cringed, but it wasn't directed at him. It lashed blindly at the empty space in the lab while she keeps her feelings under control. It was impressive, in its own way. For all his meditation, Alvis didn't think he'd ever be able to suppress his emotions like that.

Once the flare wore itself down, Mara sighed. "It's not in-town. Caden and Syd are bringing a boat. We'll go straight to the rock from here."

Alvis bit his lip. If nobody saw him in town, there'd be no one to tell his master he'd left. Darius might not ever need to know.

"That sounds like it could be... I don't know. Dangerous."

"Nah. Cay and I grew up on boats. We'll be fine."

"And...you're sure this a good lead?"

"Pretty sure." Mara's right hand was busy entertaining Nephele, letting the tiny creation dance with her fingers. The left rose briefly to tap the apprentice's patch on Alvis's coat. "I saw that."

"On the island?"

Mara nods. "Yesterday. I'd know it anywhere."

And there was no way such an intricate symbol could turn up by accident. The curiosity that piqued was enough to silence Alvis's inner debate. Something was definitely out there, something that might have to do with his father. What kind of son would he be if he didn't follow the clues?

#

And so, there they were.

Caden and Sydney turned up as promised, manning a long boat that they had to steer and power by hand. Nephele clapped when she saw them, delighted by the novelty of being outside even if she were riding in the breast pocket of Alvis's coat. She wore a proper dress now, sky-blue, one of several doll-sized garments that Mara had produced while Alvis packed a bag with emergency supplies. To her, they might have been going on a fun trip. An adventure.

Alvis wished he could feel the same. He stood on the shore where he usually fished, shivering despite his alchemist's coat being buttoned up all the way to his neck. The wind was brutally cold to be sure, but it wasn't what left him shaking. He couldn't move. Even after Mara swung easily into the ship, Alvis couldn't pry his feet from where they'd been welded to the ground.

He gripped the strap of his saddle bag until his knuckles turned white. "I can't do this."

"Sure you can," said Mara. She stood in the vessel with one foot on the shore, holding it steady and ready to take over for Sydney the moment they pushed into the water.

Alvis shook his head, cringing as a powerful cold wind stirred up his hair and coat. "If my teacher finds out..."

"He won't find out." Mara holds out her hand. "Trust me."

And he did trust her, in spite of everything. He owed her that much after the trouble he'd caused.

So he took her hand and stepped into the boat.

#

It took an hour to reach the kooshdaka's rock. The Sound fought them, gray skies threatening a storm that whipped the normally-calm waters into high waves. Yet, it proved no match for the combined skill of Mara and Caden. They navigated hidden rocks with ease and pulled close to the jagged edges before, at last, pulling the canoe to shore in a small cove tucked into the heart of the rock.

Alvis stumbled a bit on the first step, a fist-sized rock sliding out from under his foot. Sydney caught his arm before he could fall. "Whoa there. Careful."

"All right?" Mara asked, poised on the bow as though to bound after him.

Alvis flushed. How pathetic he must seem, barely able to stand on his own two feet. "I'm fine."

He backed off then, giving the others space to drag the canoe to shore and secure it. They knew better than him, after all, and they were the ones who would get in trouble with their school if the rented equipment were damaged. He took the opportunity to get a handle on their new surroundings -- his new surroundings. The thought still made his head spin.

The Kooshda's Rock, as Mara called it, was vaguely a wedge-shaped chunk of igneous shale which had long ago lost its topsoil to the sea. This rocky southern shore was the only point

where they could safely pull in their boat; approaching the tiny island from any other direction would end in a scuttling against the sheer gray stone. Even here, most of the rock rose straight up in nearly-vertical cliffs, the tide-line stained in black against natural walls to their left and right. Alvis couldn't see a path, but none of the others seemed worried and they hadn't brought climbing gear. Beyond that, a few stubborn trees clung to the sunken mountain's peak. At its highest point, to the north, stood a towering, blackened tree. He took that to be the one that Mara had seen from the shore, the tree marked with the sigil for nigredo.

Nephele squirmed in his pocket, demanding her release with high-pitched squeaks. Alvis soothed her in Russian and moved to shelter behind the rocks before he let her out. When the others caught up a moment later, Nephele moved to Mara's shoulder, delighted to have a front-row seat as her "papa" took the lead in climbing.

Alvis, meanwhile, took up the rear. He couldn't help but feel a bit jealous of how easily Mara and Caden took to the hike, clambering over ledges and up the slope like they'd been born to climb these rocks. Even their auras were in tandem, Caden's steady pulse supporting the bright fire Mara used to lead the way.

He tried to focus on them rather than on their surroundings, because he couldn't quite shake the feeling there was something off about this island. Mara told him during the trip that a monster supposedly lived here, yet he couldn't pick up even a trace of such creatures. In fact, he felt no life here at all. Back home, his house was surrounded by the ambient quintessence of birds, beasts, fish, and the collective "life" shared by united trees. Here, where the living plants were too few to unite, he felt only himself and his friends. It was as though the tiny island had been utterly forsaken.

He shook off that rather creepy thought and braced his hand against one of the sheer stones for support. His hand found an odd change in surface texture, drawing his attention down to find an alchemical glyph.

"Hey, Al," called Sydney, from a higher rock. "What's wrong? You stuck?"

Alvis considered the odd nickname and decided it wasn't worth the trouble to dispute. He shook his head. "There's something here."

Mara and Caden were too far ahead to hear, continuing on even as Syd stepped back down to get a look at what Alvis had found. The etching was about the size of Alvis's hand, scratched into the soft dacite with some sharp metal instrument. Chalk-white, it stood out fresh against the gray stone:



Sydney leaned in for a look of his own, his wide nose wrinkling as he squinted against the wind. "I guess you know what this means?"

"Yeah," said Alvis. "It's 'salt water.'"

"...okay."

It made no sense to Alvis, either, but it couldn't be a coincidence. Looking back down the way they came, he could see another dozen symbols scratched in along the path, only visible if you were going down rather than up. Ink, boron, sulfur, glass...None of them made any more sense. A handful were scribbled beyond recognition, worn down by years of weather abuse.

Alvis dug into his bag for a logbook, but before he could retrieve one, Syd pointed his phone at the salt water mark. With a click, his screen captured the etching's image, which

lingered for only a second before he turned it on the other markings as well. The machine had a camera.

Curiosity piqued, Alvis closed his bag. He'd found a few old film cameras scattered around the house, but they were useless without the chemicals and paper needed to record their shots. "Does that thing keep pictures it takes?"

"Sure. What'd be the point otherwise?" Sydney tapped his phone a few times, then paused with fingers raised as though caught in mid-thought. His face broke into a mischevious grin, right before he suddenly dragged Alvis close to him and wrapped his long arm around the alchemist's shoulders. "Smile!"

The phone clicked again, this time with a flash that made spots dance before Alvis's eyes. By the time they cleared, Syd had released him and was holding out the phone to show off the picture he'd taken of them both. In it, Sydney beamed, all teeth and enthusiasm. Alvis just looked confused.

"Not bad, huh? I'll print you off a copy when we get back to the school." He pocketed the machine and clambered back up the slope, using his hands to brace himself and sometimes reduced to climbing on all fours. Alvis was relieved to see that he wasn't the only one who couldn't keep up, in spite of Sydney's extra muscle and height.

As they climbed, Syd raised his voice to be heard over the roaring wind. "Not much of a tech guy, huh?"

Alvis shook his head. "Not that kind of tech," he said, assuming that they were still talking about the phone. "We run a solar generator. Anything more than the lights would waste too much power. That's what Uchitel' says, anyway."

"Is that so." There was something in Syd's tone that Alvis couldn't quite place, a sort of suspicion or disbelief, as though he suspected more than he was telling. "Does he haul your water in from town?"

"We use the ocean. Separating the salt from the sea is an apprentice-standard purification. Even I can do it."

"Huh."

Syd paused again at the crest of a particularly tall step, reaching back to give Alvis a leg-up. When Alvis turned to thank him, he instead found Sydney staring after Caden and Mara.

Alvis followed his gaze, watching the two old friends climb the rocks with ease, growing closer to the blackened tree with each passing second. They might be having a race, though he hadn't heard anyone issue a challenge. Then again, maybe they hadn't needed to say it out loud. They'd barely spoken to each other while paddling the canoe, yet neither ever stumbled in the rhythm needed to keep them all on track.

Glancing back to his own level, it occurred to Alvis that Sydney wasn't watching their companions together. He wasn't watching Mara at all. Syd's dark eyes were firmly locked on Caden, right up until the moment that he noticed Alvis and broke the gaze with a light smile.

"Y'know," he said. "I've been meaning to ask you something."

A blatant attempt at distraction, but Alvis let it pass. No need to pry into matters that didn't concern him, after all.

"It's about your little doll." Syd gestured vaguely to indicate Nephele, though they were too far behind now for her to be more than a spot on Mara's shoulder. "I was wondering, how come she doesn't have a chest?"

Alvis cocked his head to one side. "She...does have a chest."

Obviously. It would have been impossible for a construct to exist without one, given that it housed the ever-vital heartstone. Alvis had spent nearly a month building that torso, from the clavical and vertebrae to every hinged rib.

Syd shook his head. "Nah, man. I mean..." He cupped his hands against his chest as though trying to carry some exceptionally large apples. When Alvis didn't get it, Syd made the gesture again and squeezed. No dice. "Boobs, Al. She has no boobs."

"Oh." Half-remembered anatomy lessons floated to the surface of Alvis's thoughts. "You mean mammaries."

Syd dropped the gesture as quick as he'd made it, holding out his hands palms-first as though in self-defense. "Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't expect Paris Hilton, not with Mara's genes--"

He shot another quick, nervous glance towards their companions, perhaps afraid that Mara's quintessence-enhanced hearing would catch his words. Luckily, she and Caden were upwind and thus remained peacefully oblivious to the whole exchange.

"--but it's different with the doll, right? I mean, Mara's flat, but she's still got something. Little Neph, it's like she has no breasts at all."

"That's because she doesn't. The Tincture of Flesh doesn't allow for sexual characteristics." Alvis ducked his head, knowing that his cheeks must be flushed cherry-red. He understood the principal of sexual characteristics and attraction, but his teacher always skimmed over the details. He'd gotten the impression that it wasn't meant to be talked about so openly.

"She won't, um. Won't ever reproduce. So she needs no milk."

Syd made a curious noise, slowing their hike a bit so the two of them could walk as close to side-by-side as the path allowed. "Is that because she's too small to have kids?"

"Oh, no. She just doesn't have the necessary, er. Equipment." Alvis half-wished that he'd brought along some of the lore, so he could quote the passages directly, but this probably wasn't the right time for such things anyway. "Constructs can't reproduce biologically. They're created. So, no sex organs. Not usually."

"Usually?"

Alvis winced, regretting his information slip almost instantly. He'd read and overheard many accounts of less-than-savory alchemical practices, mostly recorded as warnings for future trainees. Still, he didn't like thinking about them. Being associated with such questionable efforts was not something he enjoyed.

"There have been...experiments. In the past."

Sydney raised an eyebrow. As fondly as Alvis regarded his new friend, he was quickly growing to hate that expression.

"Some alchemists have modified the tincture to create sexually viable constructs. But it isn't standard procedure -- most orders forbid it. For ethical reasons."

The eyebrow crept higher. Alvis forced a shrug.

"Human sexuality can be a corrupting influence."

Syd nodded, half in understanding and half to himself in sage-like approval. "You can say that again."

An odd tone had returned to his voice, though not the same as before. His aura -- normally as light as a cool summer breeze -- took on a dark, stronger quality not unlike the winds that howled through the rocks around them.

"It's also because of the jackalopes," said Alvis, trying to keep his voice light.

The sudden subject switch startled Sydney into a laugh. "The what now?"

"The jackalopes." Alvis grinned. Of all the warning tales he'd heard of the years, this one was his favorite. "A few centuries back, there was an experiment involving chimeras - constructs which combine multiple species. The tests had something to do with reproduction, whether the joined traits would be passed down, so the test subjects had to be sexually viable. Only one subject managed to escape into the wild. By the time they caught it, it'd produced offspring with the local rabbit population. The genes passed into the wider species, so now one out of every three hundred thousand jackrabbits in North America gets antlers."

Sydney laughed, managing to hold his own against the wind. Alvis caught himself smiling too wide and quickly reined the expression in. A memory tickled at the back of his mind, the memory of laughing with another friend, at another place in another time...

He shook it off and focused instead on Syd's aura. Its true, bright quality had returned, though Alvis could still feel a hint of the darker winds now that he knew they were there. It seemed that Sydney's aura was like a spiral storm, layer upon layer wrapped around to keep his true self safe in the calming eye.

Up ahead, Mara and Caden had reached their destination, disappearing into the green that clung to the island's peak. The path turned into underbrush, rocks giving way to open, tangled grasses not unlike those that surrounded Alvis's home. The two of them could catch up with one last push.

"How do you know that Nephele is a girl?"

Syd's quiet words brought Alvis up short, and not just because they seemed to come out of nowhere. For now, Sydney's attention was entirely on him, less because of curiosity and more due to an underlying need to understand for reasons that Alvis did not know.

"No sex means no gender, yeah? So how do you know for sure that she's a she?"

Alvis mulled it over. Finally, he settled on a gut instinct. "I suppose I don't. But if she didn't like it, I'd hope she would find a way to tell me."

Sydney breathed a sigh of relief. It made Alvis feel like he'd just passed some important test despite not actually knowing what he was being tested for.

"Hey, guys!"

The call came from up ahead. Mara perched on a boulder there, hands cupped around her mouth as Nephele stood on her shoulder and waved both arms with excitement.

"Hurry up, you two. We found something."

CHAPTER TEN

Mara craned her head back, peering up into the branches of the massive blackened tree. From here, at the edge of the high cliff on the north end of the kooshdaka's rock, they could see for a good mile over the open water, but even without the boost from the land this tree would have towered over everything else on the rock. Its leaves were dead and its wood rotting. By all accounts, it should have fallen years ago.

And yet, it remained. Because it was not a tree.

It was an antenna.

The very sigil that first drew Mara's attention also betrayed the post's true nature, as it tore straight through the blackened wood to a core of solid plastic and steel. The "branches" were hollow fakes and the "roots" were thick wire, which bore straight down into the stone and disappeared into the island's core.

Mara circled its base, cradling Nephele in her hands so the little construct wouldn't go leaping into trouble. After her second lap she rounded back to check on the boys. "What do you think? Radio?"

"Or radar," said Syd, pulling up a handful of bark. "Maybe military."

Caden grunted his agreement and dug his multi-tool into the rotting wood. With a yank, a notebook-sized chunk fell away to expose the control panel that Syd pointed out once he and Alvis got up the slope. This popped open in turn once the knife edge had been wedged into the gap. Ash and debris poured from its cover. "Whatever it was, it's junk now."

Syd lit up the flashlight on his cell, shining it into a messy tangle of wires. Nephele squirmed in Mara's hand until "papa" held her up for a look, at which point she immediately grabbed the nearest wire and pulled. The nest crumbled into an ash cloud and caught Nephele full in the face. She fell back into Mara's palm, coughing.

"Ye-up," said Syd. "Totally fried. Lightning, if I had to guess."

Nephele whined like a distressed kitten, scrubbing her soot-stained face. Her teeny voice reminded Mara of her baby sister keening for their mother's attention. She chuckled, following one of the metal "roots" until it disappeared, bringing her to where Alvis had been examining the connection between the wire and the ground. "Mama, Séek' is asking for you."

Alvis rolled his eyes over 'Mama,' but nonetheless stopped his exploration to dig a handkerchief from his bag and reach for his soot-stained creation. "All right, give her here. Do you have any water?"

Mara handed Nephele over and dug a canteen from her backpack. They hadn't packed much for this trip, since it was only a short paddle and a hike, but it didn't hurt to be prepared with what they were investigating. Besides, school regulations required them to carry a first-aid

kit, cell phone, and emergency supplies with them whenever they rented "outdoor activity equipment."

She watched, amused, as Alvis wrangled a squirming Nephele for her makeshift shower and a scrub with the hankie. When Nephele started a tantrum, Mara stepped in to help hold her still until she and her clothes had been cleaned and dried.

Once they had her settled again, this time in the front pocket of Alvis's bag, Mara again drew the boy's attention to the antenna-tree and its coiling wires. "Is this alchemy? Like your trees?"

Alvis shook his head. "No way. Soaking all that tech in a tincture would ruin it long before the lightning could." He gestured to the surrounding trees -- most of which were long dead -- as well as the natural pathway they'd followed that lead back to where they stashed the canoe. "There are sigils all over these rocks, plus on a few of the real trees, but they don't mean anything. It's all random."

"What about these?"

From her coat pocket, Mara pulled out a pair of dented, tarnished brass rings she'd found wedged into the rocks on their way up. Each had a hole about the size of a half-dollar coin, their metal pressed thin and flat into half-inch bands. Two smaller holes were bored into either side of each peice.

Alvis rolled one of them along his palm, pale eyebrows scrunched together in contemplation. "I don't know. They're clearly man-made."

"Which means that someone has been here."

"I suppose. But it could have been a long time ago."

A whistle called to them from the other side of the antenna. Mara hopped up and dragged Alvis with her, recognizing Caden's familiar call for attention on a hunt.

Twenty feet from the antenna's base lay a solid square of concrete, about four feet on each side and partially concealed by a few artfully arranged rocks. Dead in its center sat a partially covered manhole. Its rusted shield bore a five-pointed Air Force star.

Without pausing to think, Mara knelt on the cement and dragged the cover aside. The ladder was rusted as well but still good, holding strong to the cement edge. Still, Mara stopped dead.

Darkness. That's all she could see beyond the ladder, which disappeared after five rungs. A dripping sound echoed from far below, keen against her eardrums like hot needles. The trapped air smelled of brine and soaked rocks. Like a cave.

Crouched on the edge, Mara clenched her hands into fists and reminded herself to breathe. It was not a cave. It was not a cave. It was not...

A hand on her shoulder. She jumped and knocked it off, catching Alvis's flash of bewildered hurt. It made her feel like she'd just kicked a puppy.

"Sorry," she muttered, turning her head deliberately away from the hole. She found Caden kneeling opposite, his face tight as their eyes met. He knew. Mara cleared her throat. "So. Military it is."

"Totally," said Syd. "And check this out."

He pointed to a cluster of scratch-marks that Mara hadn't noticed before. The same symbol had been etched three times around the edge of the manhole.



Alvis frowned at it. He swung his bag around -- to Nephele's giggling delight -- and dug out a hard-backed journal, though it wasn't the one that belonged to his father. His quick page-turning only set Mara more on-edge as the smell of the not-cave burrowed deep into her nose.

"Well?" she snapped. "What does it mean?"

Alvis closed the notebook and shook his head, looking perturbed. "I don't know. It's not in here."

Mara locked her jaw and forced herself to breathe in through her nose. In on a five-count. Hold three. Out seven. Focus.

It didn't work like it had back at Alvis's house. The buzz of her aura was muted, but it didn't still entirely. She could feel anxious flames licking at her bones.

She couldn't back down now. They couldn't afford to leave any stone unturned.

Caden caught her hand before she could reach for the manhole's ladder. He held it at a distance and shook his head no.

"I'm not scared."

"I didn't think you were."

Caden's eyes drifted up to the cloud-choked sky. It had gotten quite dark since they arrived, the sun completely blotted out by swirling gray. The wind, cold as ever, carried the scent of fresh rain along with the salt of the sea.

"There's a storm coming. We should go back while we can."

Anger flashed through Mara's heart. Caden must have caught it, because he pressed on before she could muster a protest.

"If we don't go, we'll be stranded until it clears." He waved a hand at the barren mess of rock and shale. "No shelter. We'd have to go down there blind. It could flood."

Primal fear punched Mara square in the gut. Heart pounding like the drums at a village dance, she tried to swallow the taste of bile but couldn't keep it from burning her throat.

Alvis's hand returned to her shoulder, offering a squeeze of extra support. Syd didn't understand the way the others could, but continued to nod in agreement anyway, as though Caden's words were just common sense. Caden himself kept hold of Mara's hand. He'd fired a cheap shot and he knew it, but at least it did the job. Mara sighed.

"Fine. Pack it up. Let's go."

#

They trudged back to the boat as a group, heads down as the wind buffeted them on all sides. Mara stuck close to Alvis so she could whisper to Nephele, assuring the little creature that she would be safe in Alvis's breast pocket and that they would all make it back to her island in one piece. She felt Alvis's eyes on her the whole way, studying her. Reading her aura, perhaps. But he didn't ask about the cave or the fear he no doubt sensed from her at the ladder's edge.

If nothing else, Mara was grateful for that.

They loaded up their canoe and dragged it into surf, which tried its damndest to yank their feet out from under them. Caden and Mara took up the paddles, using all their strength and skill to fight their way out against the current. Their life jackets bounced around their necks as the waves tried and failed to shove them back to shore.

Once they were out of the shallows and well away from the rock, it became easier. They turned the bow towards Metharme, just as lightning crackled overhead.

It struck the side of Mount Vilna itself, lighting up the sky in a single violent flash. Thunder followed soon after, almost deafeningly close, but even so Mara heard a shriek of fear. Nephele. She peered back over her shoulder to see Alvis take his hands from the canoe walls to comfort her.

In that split second, it all went to shit.

Sydney shouted a warning right as a massive wave punched the underside of their boat and sent them into the air. Alvis went flying. Mara couldn't twist fast enough to catch him, but Caden could. He dropped his paddle, grabbed the alchemist by his life jacket and dragged him back in, just as another massive wave surged beneath them.

With a thunderous crash, Caden tumbled out of the boat and into the cold, roiling sea.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Caden! Caden!"

It took Mara a solid minute to realize that the voice shrieking over wind and waves was her own. Paddle in hand, she sprawled over the edge of the canoe, elbow-deep in the frigid Pacific surf, straining her eyes for any sign of her best friend, whether it be a mop of black hair or his bright orange emergency life jacket.

For a long, terrifying minute, she found nothing. Then, at long last, he bobbed to the surface, his life jacket a flare of neon on the waves. Already, the ocean's current had carried him well out of arm's reach. He should have swam, he was a good swimmer, but he only hung there, bobbing like driftwood.

Mara bolted up-right, belatedly realizing that she'd only stayed in the canoe because Alvis and Sydney had her pinned. She kicked Caden's paddle at Syd and shouted, "Row! Row, now!" before diving into the action herself, twisting their vessel around to follow the limp form.

They bounced roughly across the waves, barely noticing when the clouds opened wide and rain began to fall. It was a fight, but they made it, coming up alongside the bright orange jacket.

"Grab him!" Mara bellowed over water, wind, and rain.

Syd leapt to obey, as Alvis pushed back to counter-balance his weight and keep them from tipping over. Syd stretched, but his hands slipped on the life jacket as the wave of their wake carried Caden farther away.

"He's not moving!" cried Syd, voice cracking as he slid over the edge of panic.

Mara cursed under her breath and brought the boat around again, pulling with all her might against the waves. Rain fell around them in buckets until they could no longer see the Latea City shore, only the hazy lights of Metharme Island and Mount Vilna High. Their home.

They pulled close again. The boat dipped dangerously as Mara and Syd both reached over the same side, but neither cared. Their eyes were only on their friend. One after the other, Syd, then Mara made a grab for Caden as he bobbed past.

Too late.

Syd grasped the life jacket, but as he pulled, Caden slipped out. He sank like a stone. Mara gave a strangled cry and dove, staying in the boat only because Alvis grabbed hold of her belt. She went head-and-shoulders into the water.

Huge, black eyes stared up at her. Webbed hands clutched Caden's clothes. A cloud of long, loose hair waved in the currents like black weeds.

The kóoshdakáa hissed at Mara, bearing teeth like sharp knives. It sank its claws into Caden's shoulder and shot away, disappearing into the jagged undersea rocks of the Kooshda's Point. Just before it vanished, Mara saw it angle up into a rift in the stone.

She came out of the sea with a gasp, hauled back into the canoe by Alvis and Syd. She slipped off her seat and landed in the bottom, hacking up sea water and choking down air. Alvis clung to her like he was afraid she would take another dive. His pocket trembled, Nephele sobbing inside.

Syd still held the empty life jacket. He clung so tight that his dull nails threatened to tear straight through.

"Cay," he choked, skewing an octave too high. "Caden. Is he...?"

Mara's eyes burned as she choked up the last of her water. She tried to explain, but all that her brain would provide was, "A-aawatáw."

Their baffled expressions made Mara's heart hurt. Caden would have understood. Caden would have known.

She pulled herself back onto the bench and took up the paddle again, turning their canoe back towards Kooshda's Point.

"She took him," she managed, in English this time. "She took him back there. She'll make him into a kóoshdakáa."

#

They made it back to the shore in record time. It was sheer dumb luck that they didn't wreck the canoe in the process. They hit the beach hard, dragged their vessel into the cove, and unceremoniously dropped it before bolting for the manhole cover in the trees.

Rain made the rocky path frustratingly slick, which slowed them down and sent Mara's blood pressure through the roof. Every pounding thump of her heart warned her how bad this

could go if she's wrong, if there wasn't a connection between that hole in the ground and the one she in the sea. If she was wrong, her dearest friend would be gone. He'd be lost to the nightmare, a legend she'd believed long dead, twisted and turned into one of its own, and she'd be forced to go home and explain to his father how she led his youngest son straight to a watery grave.

By the time they reached the cement block, the rain around them came down in sheets. This time, Mara could not allow herself to hesitate. She tore the manhole cover away and dropped into the darkness before either Alvis or Syd could stop her. The end of the ladder came in seconds and she fell.

The drop wasn't long, but was enough to jar her off her feet on the landing. She toppled to her hands and knees, landing elbow-deep in calm water. Surrounded by pitch black, her ears rang in the sudden stillness.

She gasped, filling her lungs with the scent of old metal and soaked rock. It choked her. She groped through the water, finding only flat, rough stone beneath her hands and knees.

For a split second, she found herself unstuck in time and space. She became a child again, clinging to the rocks as the waters rose and pinned her in. She became a boy. A boy who drowned. A boy who died.

Then, a voice from above called her name and reminded her who and where she was.

"Mara? Mara, can you hear me? Are you okay?"

Searching hands found metal beneath the water. A grate. No, a drain. The "stone" was only concrete. This place was man-made.

Mara lay her hands over the rusted metal and called back up the manhole, "I'm fine, Alvis. It's safe."

"Catch this first."

Mara squinted. With the storm raging, she could barely see the hole that she came from, save for the constant movement of the pouring rain. "I can't see anything."

"You'll see this. Ready?"

Though her knees protested, Mara forced herself to stand and waded back to the hole, holding out her hands until she felt the rain. Alvis answered her call of, "Ready," with a brilliant green orb that blinded her as it fell. She snatched it from the air and drew it close. So warm.

It turned out to be one of the glass spheres from Alvis's lab, the ones that held alchemical fire. Aurora-green flame licked at the glass, warming Mara's numb fingers and providing just enough light to see by once she brought it in out of the rain.

Alvis himself followed shortly thereafter, dropping into the water and stepping out of the rain before drawing a taking a second orb -- this one golden yellow - out of his bag. Syd came last, using his cell as a flashlight. He still carried the life jacket.

Between the three of them, the chamber was fully illuminated. They stood at the center of a perfectly square concrete box. There were no windows, and the lights along the ceiling were long dead. Six inches of water covered the floor, slowly seeping out through a drain directly under their feet. Around the walls ran a rusted iron catwalk, which in turn lead to a series of doors, some closed, some open, some broken off their hinges. Two sets of stairs led from the water up onto dry metal.

Shivering in soaked clothes, they waded from the water up onto the catwalk. Alvis kept his Fire tucked close to his chest, so Nephele could poke her little hands from the pocket and warm them on the glass. He lifted it from her reach only to shine its light along the wall.

"Look at this."

Alchemical glyphs covered the walls, scratched haphazardly into the cement. Layered one over the other in a chaotic mess, they seemed random save for one repeated again and again:



Mara shuddered. If this was the kóoshdakáa's lair, then these glyphs must be its work. It had lured them here.

They didn't linger long, shining their light onto each door in turn to reveal more concrete rooms in various states of disrepair. Most contained banks of the most ancient-looking computers that Mara had ever seen, with tiny screens and huge buttons and microphones the size of small clubs.

At his third door, Syd paused. He screwed up his face. "Do you hear that?"

Mara listened. She took a deep breath and tried to center herself, the way Alvis showed her. Her hearing grew sharper and sharper until she caught what Syd had: the not-so-distant crashing of ocean waves against an open tunnel.

She went for it, knowing it would be their best bet. Alvis and Syd followed closed behind, their footsteps thundering from catwalk back to concrete. In this room, two rows of control panels and several overturned chairs stood sentry over a thin, low tunnel -- some kind of missile launch tube. Sea-water lapped through the wide pipe, bubbling up from the cracks where it fed into the depths of the ocean.

There, beside a rusty track on the soaked cement floor, lay Caden.

Mara nearly fainted from sheer relief. She and Sydney ran to their friend's side, Syd dropping his phone in his haste to get there. Caden didn't move, but his chest steadily rose and fell. He was alive.

"He's freezing," said Syd, already pulling off his coat.

"Hold on." Mara batted him, tugging Caden's parka off over his shoulders. "Wet stuff off first, then get him something dry. Roll him over on his side in case he's..."

"Uh, guys?"

Alvis was the only one who had remained standing while the other two rushed to help their friend. He held his golden flame at arm's length, projecting its light as far as he could, pale eyes locked on the opposite side of the room.

Behind her, Mara heard the *clickclickclickclickclickclickclickclick* of a hundred tiny metal claws. She heard breath, ragged and water-logged, lungs shaking under the weight of excess moisture. She heard teeth grinding and long claws scraping the cement like jagged blades.

Slowly, so slowly, she turned and found herself face-to-face with the kóoshdakáa.

#

Mara held her breath, palms laid flat to cast the green light of her fire as far as it could go. Waves and rain echoed through the waterlogged chamber, ever-present but dulled by the surrounding layers of steel and stone. This was kóoshdakáa territory, deep beneath earth and sea. There would be no easy escape.

At the farthest edge of her light lurked the kóoshdakáa itself, hunched on all fours with its spine curled and its claws gouging the cement. It had fur on its arms and webs between its fingers and beady all-black eyes that glared through a curtain of hair. Beyond that, it stayed hidden, the same oil-slick hair grown so long and wild that it covered its body like a cape.

Anything not hidden by hair was lost beneath layers of tattered clothes. Water -- and something darker -- dripped from its form into puddles.

It hissed at Mara, barring fangs that gleamed in the firelight. Mara snarled right back and rose to one knee, keeping herself between it and Caden and Syd. She brandished the glass orb, knowing that kóoshdakáa often feared fire. She'd set it ablaze herself if that's what it took to protect her friends.

On her right, Alvis also moved towards the kóoshdakáa, likewise holding his fire before him. His steps were slow and deliberate, coming first even with Mara before pressing on, closing the distance between him and the beast.

The kóoshdakáa hissed again, its voice like waves raking a rocky shore. Heart pounding, Mara seized the back of Alvis's coat. "Don't."

He stopped with visible reluctance. Mara took the chance to stand, pulling herself against Alvis so she could hook the arm that held her fire around his waist. The kóoshdakáa retreated from their combined light, revealing for the briefest moment something long and thin hiding in its clothes. Mara would have thought it the creature's tail, only it was too thin to be an otter's tail. When it moved, it rattled against the floor with a *clickaclickaclickaclack*.

Mara kept Alvis back, reaching ever so slow into the pocket of her coat. Her fingers wrapped around a copper chain, an old necklace she'd brought along on the trip just in case. Copper repelled evil and warded against bad spirits. She could punch the creature in the face with it. Who knew what it would do?

"We can take it," she muttered to Alvis, sounding more confident than she felt as she wrapped the chain around her hand. "Syd can get Cay out if we buy them time."

Close as they were, she heard the notes shift in Alvis's aura. Not fear. She knew his fear. This sounded more...disappointed?

"Just hold on," he said back, pulling her arm from around him. He angled the fire-orb to light his way and eased towards the kóoshdakáa. He kept his other hand raised to show that it was empty.

"It's all right. We won't hurt you. You don't have to be afraid."

Mara gaped at Alvis's back. He must have been insane. Okay, yes, he probably hadn't grown up on ghost stories about the kóoshdakáa, but it had to be obvious by now that they weren't the potential threats in this room.

Alvis -- no doubt reading her aura like a book -- offered a placating grin over his shoulder and stepped ever closer to the kóoshdakáa. The creature hissed at him, its backside to the wall, ready to pounce. When he got into arm's reach, Alvis knelt and placed the golden fire-orb on the ground beside him.

With a jolt, Mara remembered that Nephele -- sweet, tiny, defenseless Nephele -- was still in Alvis's coat pocket. She would have leapt forward to retrieve her if not for Caden's weak groan from behind her. The kóoshdakáa could get behind her if she went too far ahead. She was stuck.

"All right," said Alvis, louder but no less warm than before. "No more fire. See? You're safe here. So how about you and I just--"

The kóoshdakáa jumped him.

Mara screamed, which set Syd off, cursing as he crouched protectively over Caden. Alvis landed flat on his back, head bouncing off the cement as the otter-man straddled his chest and

pinned him flat. Its claws clutched at his neck, but before Mara could bull-rush it Alvis shouted, "It's okay! I'm okay."

Mara jerked to a stop, spraying through a puddle with the copper chain pulled tight across her knuckles. She stood close enough now for her light to join Alvis's and reveal that the kóoshdakáa only had a grip on his coat, not his neck. Alvis's hands lay flat by his head, but they weren't pinned. He could have fought back if he wanted too. He didn't.

Instead, he kept still as the kóoshdakáa ruffled through his clothes, pulling at patches and pockets and buttons until it undid his shirt and got to the skin underneath. Its head ducked, hair whipping as it pressed an ear to his chest. Mara held her breath. The kóoshdakáa, too, stilled and listened.

It came back up after a long while, hair parting to reveal a startlingly human face -- young and round, with folds at the corners of its eyes. It looked... Yup'ik. Maybe Inuit, but also not, especially not with a thick patch of fur that started at the base of its ears and trailed down its neck.

It stared at Alvis, bewildered, and cocked its head to one side. "Tanik?" it said.

Mara nearly dropped her flame. Her father always told her that the kóoshdakáa could mimic humans to lure the unwary into traps, but she'd somehow expected it to be more alien, or at least more like an otter. Instead, it sounded surprisingly similar to Silena.

Alvis's eyes darted her way, his upside-down eyebrows scrunched together. "That was a word, right? It sounded like a word."

"It -- yeah." Mara shook herself out of her bewildered stupor, wracking her vocabulary for the answer. "It's Inupiaq for white person."

Alvis nodded, half-to-himself, then returned his eyes to the kóoshdakáa. "Ya ne dumayu, chto vy govorite po-russki?"

The kóoshdakáa drew itself up like an offended cat and wrinkled its entire face in confusion.

"English, then?"

That soothed the wrinkles. The disturbingly human voice came again. "I English. Some good."

"That works." Alvis smiled up at the creature, kind and calm as ever. Seeing him like that -- hair splayed and shirt open, straddled at the waist by that thing -- sparked a bitter flare in Mara's chest. It lingered, adding spots to her vision even as Alvis coaxed the creature to let him up.

"This is a trap."

Alvis shook his head, running a hand through his damp hair as he sat up. "I don't think so."

"It has to be." Mara clenched her fist until the copper chain bit into her palm. "You can't trust kóoshdakáa. They play tricks."

"But it's not really a..." Alvis stopped, holding his open shirt closed as though suddenly aware of how much skin he'd exposed. "Look -- come over here. See for yourself."

He reached for the kóoshdakáa, pausing to be sure it didn't flinch before gently brushing some of its long hair aside to reveal its face and neck. The kóoshdakáa kept still, but it was clear now that the dark blood it dripped came from its left shoulder.

Mara hesitated, then cursed herself and came over, leaving Syd and Caden to the light of Syd's phone. The kóoshdakáa straightened its back, but still remained in a crouch, so Mara had to

lean down to see what Alvis showed. She kept the copper chain in her grip and glared at the creature before leaning in.

The first thing that hit was the smell of wet copper. The newly-exposed shoulder bore a nasty wound, all jagged flesh and exposed muscle. An orca attack? Or maybe a sea lion. Either could have done it. The bite was so big and so deep that Mara was half-surprised the creature could move at all. Through the blood, she could just make out the kóoshdakáa's clavicle, which reflected the light of their combined flames...

...because it was made of copper.

"You see?" prompted Alvis, as frustratingly calm as ever as Mara's brain went silent in shock. "She isn't a monster at all. She's a homunculus."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Alvis kept a close eye on Mara's reaction. After the initial shock, she'd schooled her face back to neutrality, leaving Alvis with only the brush of her aura against his own. It flickered, and that concerned him.

Luckily, before her fear or fury could rekindle, Caden regained consciousness. He burst back into the land of the living with a choked cough and a loud retch, rolling onto his elbows as his stomach rejected the salt water. Concern sparked through Mara's aura right before she bolted to return to his side.

Alvis released the breath he didn't realize he'd been holding and turned back to the otter-man-homunculus, only to find them already gone from his side. It — she — fled in the opposite direction of the others, ducking through a corner door that appeared to be a storage closet. It sounded as though she was digging for something. Alvis left her to it. The poor thing seemed understandably skittish, and they all needed time to adjust to the revelation. Hell, he still wasn't sure how he felt about it. On one hand, a homunculus could be easily understood and made for a

vast improvement over soul-eating feral monsters. On the other, if its body had begun to break down...

He tried to put that thought out of his mind and traded his alchemical fire orb for a small jar from his bag. When he broke the seal on its lid, the powder it contained ignited into delicate copper-green flames that burned easily with only oxygen as its fuel. It would soon grow too hot to hold, but offered quite a bit more light than the self-contained spheres.

With that, he could get a better look at their surroundings now that they weren't in a collective state of panic. The chamber they'd arrived in formed a squat rectangle of gray concrete walls and exposed iron supports, save for the wall opposite the only door, which was covered in bolted-on metal sheets. There were three rows of long metal consoles, all of which were cracked or rusted or both, and a few broken office chairs apparently not worth the effort of retrieving. Not far from where Caden lay sat an open maintenance hatch, through which the sound of crashing waters and howling winds came to remind them of what was happening in the outside world.

Alvis placed his jar atop one of the consoles and lingered beside it, gauging his companions' auras and acutely aware of the fact that Caden might not welcome an outsider's concern. Once their collective pulse calmed from frantic to mild concern, he trotted over. "How is he?"

As if in response, Caden gave another painful retch and spilled his stomach contents down the maintenance hatch.

Syd chuckled, sounding exhausted and relieved as he held Caden's glasses and rubbed soothing circles into the other boy's back. "Getting the brine out of his system. That's good, right?"

“It should be.” Nodding half to himself, Alvis produced the first-aid kit he’d brought from the house. Its outsides — a plastic box with a red cross — looked identical to the one Syd had open, but half the contents of Alvis’s had been replaced with various cloth-wrapped glass vessels of extracts and tinctures. He examined a few labels until he found the one he was looking for, then handed the vial of syrupy-thick green to Syd. “When he’s done, have him take some of this; about half the bottle. Taken with water, it’ll help flush out any toxins or excess salt that’s gotten into his system.”

“Got it. Thanks man.”

Caden, apparently (thankfully) done vomiting, coughed a few times and also sent Alvis a grateful nod as he wiped his lip on his wrist. Mara knelt nearby, not touching but occasionally muttering soothing words in their shared language.

Syd fidgeted with the bottle a bit but, seeing that it wouldn’t be useful soon, set it aside next to the phone he still used to light their space.

“So...did I hear right? Our new friend—” Mara glared at that, but went unnoticed by anyone but Alvis. “-she’s a homunculus?”

Alvis’s cheeks started to hurt from the war between a grin and a frown. “Yeah. She is.”

“How?”

He shrugged. “Somebody must have created her.”

“No, but...how?” Syd sat cross-legged, and now his foot jiggled too, bouncing against the opposite knee. It made Alvis nervous just watching him. “She’s human-sized. Something that big didn’t get grown in a jar. And there’s those hands, and all that fur. That’s not human.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Alvis lay a hand over his breast pocket. Nephele pushed back against it, punching once to move the palm into a position she liked before settling against it for a cuddly

nap. “Constructs can be any size. Larger subjects require more complicated construction and upkeep, but anything’s possible if you’ve got the right materials. Mixing DNA from multiple species helps to stabilize the process, but so long as they’ve got at least one human progenitor, they’re homunculi.”

The clatter of bare, clawed feet heralded the return of the homunculus, who dumped an awkwardly large armful of mismatched cloth at their feet. Most were torn towels or battered blankets, but the largest proved to be a waterproof tarp, which the homunculus dragged out beside them to cover the puddle-strewn floor. From the way her aura crept hesitantly towards them, Alvis guessed it was trying to be helpful. “Is that for us?”

The homunculus nodded, raking claws through her long hair. Mara, meanwhile, locked her jaw and tensed, staring the homunculus down until she backed away and cleared the path to move Caden onto the dry tarp. Once he’d settled in, they looked about ready to scurry back to the supply closet, but before they could Caden caught it by the sleeve.

“You. Back at the boat. You saved me.”

The homunculus opened their mouth as though to respond, only to grow shy at the last moment and bite their lip instead. Their stained steel teeth held the slightest shape of a fang. They nodded.

Caden smiled what must have been the warmest, most honest smile Alvis had ever seen on his face. “Thank you.”

Their host blushed, red spreading across her face in odd splotches. She gave a high-pitched squeak, pressed her “paws” to her face, and ducked her head so the long hair again hid her expression from view. Then she burst into frenetic motion, tossing a blanket into each of

their laps and flinging the rest over Caden. Mara's aura bristled with protective possession. Alvis scooted closer to her side, just in case.

From behind him came a clicking noise, the same steady beat of constant metal-on-stone that he'd thought had been coming from the homunculus. He turned, but Syd found the thing first. "What the hell is that?"

Clattering towards them from the closet was a long, winding rope of tarnished copper and brass — the very thing they'd mistakenly assumed to be the "kóoshdakáa's" tail. Scrambling under the firelight revealed it to be perhaps three feet long and as wide as a toothpaste tube, made from hundreds of segmented brass pieces that locked together into a single coiling insect. Each of its segments added two more legs, all of them rattling together in constant motion to carry it across the floor. In those segments, Alvis recognized the brass rings Mara had found above-ground, metal links beaten to almost paper-thinness.

The homunculus jolted up, her gasp somewhere between happy and afraid for the bug's safety. "Ticky!"

She jumped not quite to her feet, dashed across the tarp and lowered her right arm into the insect's path. The bug-construct ran straight around her wrist and up the furred arm, disappearing briefly into clothes and hair until its head — or at least, what Alvis assumed to be its head — re-appeared out the collar on her uninjured side.

Alvis turned where he sat until he could face the new homunculus head-on. "Ticky. Is that its name?"

The homunculus nodded, nuzzling the bug-construct's head with their cheek. They drummed their claws on the cement floor and chanted, "Tick tick tick tick tick..." in time as a sort of explanation.

Alvis ran a few mental calculations as tugged open his coat to reach the breast pocket. Their new friend didn't have the greatest mental capacity, more advanced than a jar-fairy to be certain but much more childish than the teen she appeared. So while there was no way she could have built the bug, especially not with such a complex design, she at least wasn't unstable. "I have a little friend too. You want to meet her?"

Mara gave him a Look that sat somewhere between exasperated and aghast. Though he felt bad, Alvis ignored her. He was sure now that the homunculus wasn't a threat. She was too human.

He unbuttoned the pocket, freeing Nephele from her hiding place. She was more hesitant to emerge than she'd been before the crash, poking her head out first and peering up at him for permission before climbing into his palm. There she sat cross-legged and allowed him to hold hers to the other two constructs. "This is Nephele."

The "kóoshdakáa" brushed her hair back for a better look. Her dark eyes lit up with interest, clever understanding overwhelmed by childish excitement. Nephele peered back with interest as the much larger homunculus wet her lips.

"Nehffuh..."

"Neff-a-lee," said Alvis, lingering a moment on each syllable. He eased Nephele into the other construct's hands, keeping his own close so the fairy could escape if she got overwhelmed. "How about you? What's your name?"

"Qalu."

"Kah-loo." Alvis repeated it in his mind a few times before offering his own name in return. A round of introductions went around the group. Even Mara offered her name as she settled onto the tarp on Alvis's opposite side.

Qalu didn't blink as she absorbed each name in turn. Her quintessence — which was, in truth, somewhat weak — thrummed with a hint of wonder that made Alvis ache in sympathy.

“Do you live alone down here, Qalu?”

The question burst out of him before he could think better. His face burned as the others, in the corner of his eye, exchanged meaningful looks.

Qalu hummed, dangling a lock of hair for Nephele to swing from as she shook her head. “Not alone. Have Ticky.”

The centipede clicked its mandibles together, squirming out of Qalu's clothes and starting back down their arm as though annoyed at being forgotten.

“But no one else?”

Another hum. Another shake. Nephele giggled and kicked her legs to keep swinging, pulling enough hair that it would probably hurt a human. As a construct, Qalu noticed nothing.

“You must be lonely.”

“Some lonely. Not long.” Qalu grinned much wider than a human could, showing off an entire mouth of stained silver teeth sharpened to fanged points. “If lonely, swim. Get fish. Play with—” Instead of words, she dissolved into a high-pitched noises echoing barking otters, chittering dolphins, and the grunt of sea lions. Then she switched back as though it were nothing. “Visit King too. Sometimes.”

Mara snorted, crossing her arms over her chest. “There's a king now?”

Alvis shrugged, though several associated thoughts sprung to mind when he considered the word. In alchemy, a king could mean many things: sulfur, the sun, the essence of masculinity. He married the White Queen to father the white stone and, as Ego, must be incinerated before personal transformation could be achieved.

But none of these things seemed to fit Qalu's meaning. All she would say was, "King a good friend."

The topic dropped.

Nephele swung from the long hair onto Qalu's clothes, clambering up her collar to the place where torn clothes gave way to torn skin. She stopped when her hands hit blood, recoiled, and fell back into Qalu's waiting palms. Her own hands had blood on them now, and Nephele hurriedly wiped them on Qalu's fur.

Sydney winced. "Ow. Doesn't that, y'know, hurt?"

Qalu only gave him a blank look, so Alvis explained instead. "Homunculi don't feel pain." He reached for the first aid kit again, pulling out a roll of bandages. "I can wrap that arm for you, if you want. If you don't cover it you'll get salt in your bones and that's not good."

"Put the doll down first," said Mara, holding out her hand for Nephele.

Qalu made a displeased noise, but handed Nephele over. Mara settled Nephele into an old towel nest and returned to sullen silence, one ear turned towards the maintenance hatch as though listening for the storm. They all took to that for a little while, the room otherwise quiet as Alvis wrapped Qalu's shoulder in white gauze. He wondered how long they'd all been down here, how long the storm had been going on, if there was anyone from the school looking for Mara and the others. If a search party did come, what would he do?

Thankfully, Syd saved him from that train of thought. Without his mechanical toys to distract him, he'd taken to alternately checking on Caden (who grew progressively more sheepish with each check-in) and letting his eyes wander while his hands and feet jiggled like mad. At last, he burst out with, "What the hell is this place, anyway?"

Mara snorted. "Some Air Force thing."

“Well, yeah, but what kind? There’s not a nuke or something in here, right?”

“They wouldn’t abandon a nuke, dork.”

“It’s probably from the war.”

The last line came from Caden, who seemed to growing gradually more uncomfortable with his pile of blankets. He pushed a few of them off and sat up, but didn’t complain when Syd immediately draped the discarded ones over his shoulders.

“And which war would that be?” asked Mara, grinning a bit for the first time since Caden went under.

Caden shrugged. “World War II, early Cold War... served the same purpose either way. Early warning for attacks by sea.” He tugged a blanket up to his chin and nodded to the odd wall out, the one covered with bolted metal. “Bet that’s windows, away from the harbor. This could’ve been a look-out. They took a lot underground to hide from bombs or spycraft. The old base had tunnels too, supposedly.”

Alvis kept quiet, concentrating on Qalu’s shoulder. All this talk of underground things made him nervous, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on why.

Syd’s head continued to roam, as he appeared stuck between wanting to pace the room and not wanting to leave Caden’s side. “Maybe we should check out the other rooms. That Air Force alchemist guy could’ve made Qalu here, yeah?”

Qalu shook her head, though her shoulder remained still under Alvis’s hands. “Not here. I find. Safe place.”

Alvis wound off the last of the bandages, taped the whole arrangement into place, and said, “If that’s so, where did you come from? The old base?”

He regretted the question almost instantly. Qalu's face fell and her lip trembled. Ticky wound its way around her neck, dragging her hair back down and once again hiding her eyes.

"It's a bad place," she managed, barely more than a whisper.

Sydney laughed. "C'mon man, she can't have come from the old base. It's been a school for decades and she ain't that old."

"She might be. Homunculi don't really age. Most just...fall apart, after a while." Thinking about it made Alvis feel sick. He swallowed the feeling as best he could. "With Qalu, though...look at the variations in skin and fur color. Looks like someone's patched her up a few times."

"Someone like who?"

"Her 'King'?" offered Caden.

Alvis nodded. "He could be the alchemist who worked with the Air Force."

"Oh come on!" Syd threw up his hands. "Alchemists working with the Air Force? Now you're pulling my leg."

"I'm not!"

Syd and Caden both chuckled. Alvis felt his face heat up with the suspicion that he'd just missed some obvious joke.

"It's n-not in any official capacity, but there are practitioners who take up mainstream science positions. Sometimes it's on Order instructions, sometimes for their own reasons. They do the same thing with the clergy." He tugged at his shirt collar which, despite being fairly loose, now felt a bit too tight. "It wouldn't be unheard of for an alchemist working with the government to, um, borrow funding for their own experiments."

“And the stick around to keep it up.” Mara quirked an eyebrow in Alvis’s direction.

“Your teacher?”

Alvis shook his head. “No. He wouldn’t.”

“You sure about that?”

And there it was again, that odd tone in her voice and suspicious thrum in her essence. Of course Alvis was sure. His master had only the one lab, there wouldn’t be any point to keeping a second one, let alone a second one that was a secret.

She didn’t wait for his answer, her gaze moving from him to Qalu and turning into a glare somewhere along the way. “Hey. You ever go back there?”

Qalu must have caught the odd tone as well, because she hunched her shoulders and retreated a bit like a cornered cat.

“There’s a school on the old base now. Do you ever go back?”

Every word that Mara spoke added another drop of tension, her aura stirring the already heavy air into a stupor. Alvis cleared his throat. “Mara...”

“It’s a simple question.” Mara tugged her elbow out of his reach and rolled onto one knee to put herself closer to Qalu. “Answer me, you. Speak up.”

With every nervous shake of her head, Qalu’s hair seemed to grow thicker and cover more of her face. Ticky’s clicking grew more rapid, and a webbed hand closed over Qalu’s wounded shoulder.

“Bad,” she muttered. “It’s bad. Bad place. Won’t go back. Aapiyaga is there.”

“Your brother?”

In that one word, Mara’s aura burst, coughing out sparks and sputters like a dying fire revived with wet wood. She lunged and flung Qalu’s hair aside, earning a scream as the

homunculus tried to scramble away. Mara seized her by the shoulders and dragged her back.

Ticky hissed and Qalu thrashed, but Mara had them pinned.

“Where is he?” When she didn’t get an answer, Mara gave Qalu a hard shake. “Don’t you dare clam up now! Tell me about this brother. Where the hell is he?”

“Mara, stop it!” Alvis grabbed her from behind, but wasn’t strong enough to pull her off.

On the ground, Nephele burst into tears and fled her makeshift nest, bounding off Caden’s knees and onto Syd. Sydney caught her and swore, “Jesus Christ, Mar!”

“I want answers, dammit!”

“Ax já, stop it.”

Mara stopped. Alvis pulled back, momentarily jealous of how easy it’d been for Caden to make her stop. He hadn’t even raised his voice, just fixed Mara with a thousand-yard stare that, to Alvis, seemed frustratingly blank. His aura hadn’t changed much either, keeping up that same steady, earthy beat it always seemed to have.

Mara held out a few more seconds, though her essence had already cooled with shame. She backed away with her hands raised. Qalu stayed right in Syd’s grasp and shook.

Caden sighed. “Go get some air, okay?”

“...Okay.”

Mara scooped up her green fire and left without another word.

Once she was well away, Caden turned a kind eye back to Qalu. “Sorry,” he said gently. “You didn’t do anything. Mara just doesn’t like caves.”

Qalu chewed her lip again, running her hands one over another along Ticky’s metal back. Caden coaxed her back to the tarp and offered her one of the blankets, letting her settle down a bit before he tried to ask again. “Would you please tell us about your brother?”

Qalu fidgeted, staring intently at a hole in the tarp. “He bad. Very bad.” She scraped her claws along the cement, which made a painful shrieking noise. Syd was the only one who winced. “Bad brother did a bad thing. The baddest thing. Then he die. But maybe, not dead now.”

Caden cocked his head to one side. “You’re not sure?”

“I stay away from bad place. He never leave.”

“Why is that? Is there something there that he wants?”

Qalu shrugged. “Don’t know. Won’t go back.”

Alvis stared after Mara, the broken door hanging open to the dark chamber beyond. She’d scared him, but more than that he was worried. He stood up.

“Take care of Nephele,” he told Syd, taking only the remaining fire orb to light his way. “I’m going to go talk to Mara.”

#

He found her in the square chamber full of catwalks and water that had been their entrance into this odd not-quite-cave. She sat on the rusted walk with her feet dangling, arms crossed so she could rest her chin on the lower rung of the guardrails. Her fire orb rested easily in one of the grates, casting ghostly green light down into the rainwater pool.

She didn't even look up when Alvis approached her, despite all the noise the old catwalk made. He sat down beside her and mimicked her pose as best he could, but his legs were much longer and thus he had to sit cross-legged to avoid yet more water in his boots. They sat there a

while without a word, watching and listening as the rain poured in through the open manhole cover high above.

Mara sighed. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled."

"I'm not the one you should apologize to."

He didn't mean it as an accusation. She didn't seem to take it that way. They lapsed into silence again as the square chamber echoed with the natural white noise. Alvis realized that Mara was trying to breath in time, but she kept dropping the count, which made her aura flare up every time.

Alvis closed his eyes and started doing his own breathing. He focused entirely on the quintessence beside him, urging his own aura to guide that bright and fiery life into a more soothing, stable pulse. It happened much faster than he expected. Soon, Mara's breathing had evened out to match his.

They lasted about a minute before Mara straightened her back and pulled out of the meditation. Alvis followed her, noting when he opened his eyes that her body and aura both looked more relaxed. However, they weren't back to a hundred percent just yet.

"Thanks," said Mara, rolling a kink out of her shoulders. "I think I'm okay now."

"No you're not."

She gave him a Look. Alvis stared her right back.

"Your aura's been muted ever since we came down here. Every emotional flare's been like adding wet wood -- all sparks and smoke with no direction. So you're not okay."

Mara turned away. She kicked her feet, brushing the water's surface with the soles of her boots and watching the ripples that spread from that contact. Alvis shook his head and climbed to his feet.

"If you don't want to talk to me, that's fine. I can go get Syd..."

Mara caught his sleeve before he could pull away. She shook her head, eyes still on the water. Alvis sat back down.

Silence returned. This time, however, it didn't last long.

"I had a brother."

She dropped the past tense so simply, with so much as a twitch in her expressionless mask. Only her aura and the slight tremble in her voice gave her away.

"He drowned before I was born. Wandered off from fish camp, got caught in some rocks. By the time they realized it was too late."

"...I'm sorry."

Mara shrugged. "I never knew him. But my parents gave me his name."

Alvis cocked his head. Mara caught it and chuckled. Was it Alvis's imagination, or did that laugh sound...fond?

"He was Tamas. I'm Tamara. We're both Naaças'úi, after our great-grandfather." She dug around in her coat pocket a bit and pulled out a fistful of pennies, which she began tossing into the water one at a time. "Thing is, you're not supposed to do that. A shared name means a shared spirit, and you're *supposed* to wait until the *íxt*' confirms that. But there aren't shaman anymore. And Dad wanted it so bad..."

She frowned, giving one particular penny a hard twist that sent it skipping along the water's surface until it hit the pouring rain - plop! - and disappeared.

"I used to have these dreams. Drowning dreams. Kóoshdakáa dreams. Cave dreams." She tried to twist a second time, but the spin failed and it sank straight to the ground. "When I

was little, I used to think that maybe they came from him. If they did, I could actually be the miracle Dad wanted."

She sighed, letting the last few pennies slip easily from her hand. They rattled through the catwalk, briefly illuminated gold and green before they, too, sank into oblivion.

"It's stupid, I know."

Alvis shook his head. "It's not."

He didn't have to read her aura to know Mara didn't believe him, but she smiled anyway, and it was a real smile, so he decided that'd be good enough. Still, a question nagged at him. Though he tried to keep it pinned in, eventually it wormed its way out.

"Your dad... does he treat you like your brother?"

"You could say that." Mara snorted, blowing her dyed bangs up on a puff of air. "Daddy had such plans for his heir: the finest education at a tribal college, delegate to the Central Council, a lifetime of lobbying the white government for rights and justice... a real leader of the people. When Tam died, it all fell to me."

It sounded impressive to Alvis. A real heroic destiny. Yet, her words dripped with sarcasm

"Seems like you'd be good at it."

"So what? I don't want it. That's why I came out here." Mara gestured vaguely at the ceiling in a way that Alvis took to mean that Latea 'out here,' not the cramped little room filled with fresh rain. "If I stayed, I'd be on Dad's track the rest of my life. This town, that school, they're the only chance I've got. I could get a scholarship here, go to art school, move somewhere where I can do what I want. Be who I want. You understand, right?"

"What?" Alvis startled, lifting his head from the railing. Mara was staring at him now, their eyes locked without blinking.

"You feel the same way. You have to. That's why you're willing to risk coming out here. You want more than what your teacher's training you for."

It almost hurt to break her gaze, but Alvis forced himself to do it, staring instead at his feet. "That's not really a possibility for me."

"Says who?"

He bit his lip. Once again, he would be unable to give her an answer.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"What were you thinking?!"

Mara ducked her head, eyes locked on the tile floor of the girl's dormitory's front hall. Mr. Petrov didn't raise his voice very often, but when he did it always came with that strained little squeak of worry that seemed designed to draw out guilt the way spring thaw pulled marmots from hibernation. Those pale eyes bore into the top of her head until she looked up again, catching the full weight of disappointment, anger, and concern carried by his expression.

"You've all taken the certification courses. You should know better than to set out in a canoe *by yourselves* without checking the weather report first." He pinched the bridge of his nose, glasses sliding down to the tip as he did. "You're lucky no one was seriously hurt. You're lucky no one was *killed*. And to top it all off, you missed dinner and you're two hours late for curfew."

"Sorry sir," said Syd, grinding his foot into the carpet. Mara mimicked his hunched posture and muttered a 'sorry' of her own, but she wasn't really. She doubted Syd was either. They were both distracted.

They'd gotten Alvis back to his island after sun set, just in time to spot the green flames on Metharme that signaled his teacher's return. He'd rushed off without a word, and they'd had to leave just as fast or risk blowing his cover. To make matters worse, the moment they'd pulled the canoe into the dock they'd been set upon by two half-frantic teachers who immediately took note of Caden's persistent chill and hustled him off to sickbay. Mara knew enough about drowning and near-drowning to know that he was going to be okay. Both of them; Alvis's "master" would never know he was gone. Still, she couldn't help but worry. Syd was probably the same way.

Mr. Petrov couldn't know the whole story, but he seemed to read the concern in their eyes. Or maybe he just felt bad, since they'd had to row back in the rain and currently resembled a pair of half-drowned puppies. He sighed, pushed the glasses up his nose until their frames covered his eyes, and said, "You're banned from equipment rentals until the end of the semester. All three of you. Take the class again next spring to get your certification back."

Mara nodded absently. It was a fair punishment. Generous even. Maybe he thought Caden's near-drowning to be enough to drive the point home.

"Go to bed. Don't forget your homework."

Syd waved a quick goodbye and slipped out the door, promising to text Mara the moment Caden returned to their shared room. Mr. Petrov lingered a moment longer, his eyes on Mara -- no doubt searching for some indication of her trouble-making, like Faulkner asked -- but then the professor on desk duty called him over, giving Mar the chance to escape. She slipped up the stairs, ignoring the whispered rumors that followed her all the way up to the fourth floor.

Outside, weak rain continued to tap at the barrack walls, echoing down the long tower of the stairwell the same way it had down the entrance to Qalu's underground home. Mara wasn't concerned about that creature. Homunculus. Whatever. She got the feeling it -- *she* -- had weathered worse storms in the time it took to become a local legend. Alvis, though... she kept coming back to those bandages on his hands; different than they'd been on the day they met again. If she strained her old memories through the haze of sickness and "awakening," she could just recall similar wounds on the day they first met, though those had been on his arm and cheek.

It wasn't normal to get injured that often. And there were worse things to weather than storms.

Of course, by the time Mara reached their shared room Silena was already there, sitting cross-legged on her bed with wet hair and a towel draped around her neck. Across her legs lay her quilt, for warmth, and on top of the quilt sat a thick novel, open on her lap. When Mara came in, Silena's gaze barely lifted from the page. "Welcome back."

Mara rubbed at her ear. The passive aggression underlying those words rang like she'd just surfaced from a deep dive. "Good to see you too."

With a huff, Mara turned her back on Silena and began stripping out of her rain-soaked clothes, kicking the boots under her bed first and lobbing the hunting jacket at her laundry. It knocked the hamper over, spilling dirty clothes across the floor.

Silena gave the mess a dirty look. She marked her place in the book with a deliberate air, though the pages remained open. "So, what's the damage?"

Mara peeled off her shirt, which came away soaked and clinging like a layer of shed skin. "Excuse me?"

"How much trouble are you in?"

Silena pronounced each syllable as though teaching an child to speak English. Her aura rang Mara's eardrum like a house-cat batting at a bell.

Mara tossed her shirt into the laundry with perhaps a tad more force than she needed.

"We're grounded. No boats or skis until next semester."

"That's it?"

"Got a problem with it?"

"No. Not at all." Silena wrung the last bit of water out of her hair and discarded the towel, resettling the quilt across her shoulders. She turned the covered half of her face towards Mara and muttered, "I figured Petrov would go easy on you again."

Mara pulled her belt tight across her knuckles until it bit into the skin. Silena's poise reminded her of her mother, wearing a chilkat blanket and presiding over special events like the daughter of great men she was. After the day she'd had, the last thing she wanted was to be reminded of the things from home she missed.

She tossed the belt onto her nightstand with a crash and faced her roommate head-on, arms crossed. Even stripped down to jeans and a sports bra and standing a head shorter than her roommate, she knew -- thanks to her father -- exactly how to throw her weight around. "You got something to say?"

Silena eyed her. One eye. The other socket remained covered by her hair. "What were you really doing today?"

"I went boating--"

"Horse shit." Silena tossed her book aside, letting it crash onto her dresser with a band and knock two more volumes onto the floor. "What'd you do, sign your name on the sheet, send

your boyfriends off, and hide out at the main building? You sure weren't here. Maybe you broke into the janitor's closet. Or do you just have access to those tunnels under the school?"

She could have grown a third arm and it wouldn't have been as confusing as the nonsense pouring out of her now. Mara opened her mouth, thought better of it, and shook herself before she tried again. "The hell are you on about?"

"Don't play dumb." Silena glared like she could burn a confession out of Mara with her eyes. When that didn't work, she snapped. "The bathroom, Edenshaw. Girls' bathroom, first floor, around the corner from Petrov's office. It got wrecked. Today."

Mara's back went ramrod straight. That one word, wrecked, painted vivid pictures in her imagination. Broken mirrors, clawed walls, torn-down toilet stalls...and all of it covered in symbols, just like the trophy hall.

Her own pulse surged into her ears, drowning out the psychic white noise. "When? How?"

"Like you don't know."

"You honestly think--"

"I don't 'think.' I know." Silena sneered. "Everyone knows it was you. Faulkner just can't prove it. He locked up the main building after they found it, trying to catch you. Half the clubs had to cancel, and the Yup'ik dancers got rained out. I couldn't even get to the library."

Mara felt herself adrift in a mix of anger, surprise, and confusion. Everyone? That couldn't be true. Petrov hadn't said a word, but...those whispers on her way up the stairs...

"Did it work?" Her voice sounded strained to her own ears, barely squeezing out through a throat that threatened to close up on itself. "The vandal. Did they catch him?"

"Obviously not. You're here."

"I didn't do it!"

"Liar!"

Mara jerked back, her nerves as tight now as they'd been in Qalu's cave. Her ears rang with the sudden volume. Silena had never shouted before.

"Faulkner's taking this out on all of us." Blankets and hair hid Silena's body, but they couldn't muffle her aura's relentless pressure as it beat down on Mara's inner ear. "Own up."

"It. Wasn't. Me."

"Sure."

That was the last straw, that arrogant little sneer down the length of Silena's elegant little nose. Mara's fury came boiling out in two words -- "Fuck you!" -- which she punctuated by slamming the bathroom door so hard it nearly jumped off its hinges.

It was only after that she realized how loud she'd been, her too-sharp ears catching the slam's echo through the pipes and walls of the old barracks. The neighbors must have heard, at least. Half the floor would know before lights out.

Mara didn't care. She turned the shower on as hot as it could go and stood there, shaking, as the heavy steam doused her soul's fire, forcing the anger and frustration it carried back under control.

#

The storm returned in earnest that night, pounding their windows as strong winds rattled the roof. Every now and then, a distant lightning flash spilled through the blinds, throwing

shadows onto the dark walls. The thunder that followed each time echoed through the silent, sleeping dormitory halls.

Only Mara remained awake, at least so far as she could tell. She sat on her bed with her back to the wall and her lamp on, drawing furiously in the sketchbook she had balanced on her knees. In two hours, she'd blown through ten pages, with no sign of stopping anytime soon.

Across the room, Silena's bed was a shadowed, lumpy mess of pillows and quilts, just as it had been since Mara emerged from the shower. Silena wasn't sleeping either. Mara could tell by her breathing. Yet, she continued to pretend so she couldn't be forced to look Mara's way, or admit that the lamplight bothered her.

Which suited Mara fine. Her roommate deserved it for being such a libelous, know-it-all brat. What did she know, anyway? True, the first-floor girls' room had been wrecked -- there were pictures all over social media -- but not one post mentioned Mara at all. Maybe Faulkner was looking to pin her for it, which would be nothing new, but there was no way that "everyone" could be buying into this absolute bullshit.

She jabbed her pencil at the page a bit too hard, snapping the point off the lead. She swore and reached across her desk for the electric sharpener. Lightning illuminated the room as she did, casting her idly-sketched portrait into sharp relief. She hadn't meant to draw Alvis, but there he was, in profile and shade just like he'd been in Qalu's cave.

Mara's fingers closed around the sharpener as thunder rumbled in its low growl. She sharpened the pencil to a fine point, pleased that the storm was making so much noise that she didn't have to "focus her thoughts" to tune out every snorer on the fourth floor. She straightened up and rolled out her aching shoulders, which threatened to rebel after a day in the kayak followed by marathon drawing. Her body needed rest, but her spite and anger kept her going.

She mused over the portrait but, too tired for the self-reflection she needed to decide whether it was worth finishing, flipped to a new page and began to draw anew. She'd barely made three lines before lightning struck so close that the window rattled in its frame. Mara's lamp and the dull orange security lights outside shut off at the same time. The entire school was plunged into darkness as the thunder roared.

Mara swore under her breath, tossing her sketchbook and pencil onto her desk. So much for art. Her phone had charged before the power blew, but it probably wasn't worth it to run the battery down when she couldn't hold the light and draw at the same time. So much for art.

She was contemplating how noisily she could put herself to bed when she heard it. It was close. Very close. Most people wouldn't have heard it over the rain. But Mara could.

Through the black, she squinted at her roommate's bed. Silena remained as immobile as ever. Maybe she really had fallen asleep.

The sound came again, longer and louder this time. It sounded almost like a pencil tearing through paper, only bigger. More...metallic.

It came from the hallway door.

After the day she'd had, Mara was in no mood to deal with more frustrating, scary nonsense. She flung off the covers and dashed to the door on bare feet, which were almost silent against the tiled floor. The chill brought her lazy senses into focus. She held her breath. Her fingers found the door.

Tiny, clawed fingers gripped her ankle in the same moment.

Instead of opening the door, Mara flung her back against it and kicked, sending the thing that had grabbed her flying. She fumbled with her phone, cursing as she heard footsteps

disappearing down the long hall. The flashlight app spilled white light across her bedroom floor and she saw.

What she saw, her mind couldn't process. It was small, perhaps a foot tall at most, with a head and a body and four human limbs. But the proportions were all wrong. Huge, mismatched eyes bulged in a face with no nose and steel-trap jaws. With no neck, it perched directly atop a lump of a torso that resembled more a furry potato than a body. The stick-thin limbs and tiny feet shouldn't have been able to support that misshapen mass but, horribly, they managed.

Despite twisting its waist more than should be possible, the creature lurched to its feet and shook with silent laughter. At the shoulders and elbows, its joints were exposed; stained copper and rusting iron. A homunculus!

Across the room, Silena screamed. Mara whipped the light to her roommate's bed, where more of the twisted monsters were clambering all over Silena. Two clung to her long hair, raking claws along her cheek and neck, while two others clambered up the bed frame to join the fray. They were laughing, always laughing, and the nest of blankets kept Silena pinned even as she slammed her good hand against the wall to dislodge the one that had sunk its rusted teeth into her palm.

Mara launched herself across the room and snatched the first homunculus her hand could find. "Off! You damn freaks, get off!"

It came away, but not without a tiny handful of black hair. Silena wailed in pain. Mara cringed from the sound and flew the homunculus into the wall. It struck head-first, denting its skull, only to leapt back up as though no worse for wear.

The next frantic seconds were a blur of shouts, screams, curses, and struggle. A momentary flash of thunder illuminated their fight. God, Mara wished it hadn't. The homunculi -

- if they had any human in them -- were disgusting, covered in grime and mud and thick hair matted to the roots with...god, was that blood? They tried to climb her sweatpants and bit her toes even as she flung them off, dragging a fistful away from Silena and slipping on a pillow.

As Mara fell to the floor, her hand knocked over her backpack, spilling the contents of an open pocket. Her fingers found a glass vial with no cork, the size and shape of a double-A battery.

Holding it over her head, Mara clenched her eyes shut and snapped the thin glass in two.

Cold, brilliant white light filled the room like a lightning strike straight to the bed. The homunculi shrieked as one, stabbing Mara's eardrums with their high pitch. Their claws clattered across the cold floor, stampeding not for the hallways door, but for the bathroom.

Mara forced her eyes open against the harsh light, but all she could see through the door were shadows diving for the toilet and shower. By the time the light faded and her vision cleared, the creatures were gone.

Not a minute later, Mara's lamp flickered back to life.

Mara cursed in three different native tongues. Silena stumbled out of her bed, clutching at the long cut that was pouring blood down her cheek. She stared at Mara, shoulders shaking as her every breath came in shallowed gasps. "What...What the hell was that?"

Mara shrugged. She couldn't find the words to respond.

Out in the hall, she could hear voices coming closer, following by swift patter of running feet and, finally, a heavy hand pounding on their door. "Mara! Silena? Are you two all right?"

Mara stumbled to her feet and to the door, turning on the overhead light before she opened it. There in the hall stood Mr. Petrov, who must have been on front-desk duty that night. A cluster of other, worried-faced girls filled the hall behind him.

Mara took a deep breath and forced her voice to remain calm. "Fine. We're fine. We're just..."

Two girls from the literature club shoved past her and rushed to Silena, who fumbled to get her prosthetic onto her hand. She was bleeding worse than Mara had thought, quickly soaking the towel that one friend pressed to her cheek.

Dressed in only her night clothes -- sweatpants and a tank-top - Mara felt exposed. She crossed her arms and turned back to Petrov, who still watched her wearily alongside the crowd of other girls.

"What?" she demanded, annoyed by their gaze.

Petrov pushed the door all the way open so she could see what they'd seen. It was covered in scratches, some of which must have spread onto the door frame. Most were shallow, but others were deep, and the deepest of all formed a shape in the center. A sigil. Unknown.



PART THREE



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It meant "Death." Among other things. Ennui, destruction, the sacrifice of the Red King, the elimination of one's ego; the sigil could mean all that and more. But eventually, it always came back to death.

Alvis guessed that this would not be reassuring to Mara. He'd received her "text" (which was clearly a photograph) around the crack of dawn and been agonizing over his response ever since. His master would be expecting him for breakfast soon. He had to write back now if he was going to respond at all.

He sighed, rolling over onto his back and disrupting Nephele, who'd been nesting in his hair. She fell onto his pillow with a squawk and popped back up a moment later, leaning over his brow to pout at him. She couldn't understand that he was talking with her "father," but she must have picked up on his concern. She always got clingy when he started radiating bad vibes.

"It's okay," he soothed, resting the phone on his chest and freeing a hand to pat her head. "I'm okay. We're okay. She's okay. It's just some awful prank. Right?"

Nephele cooed, tugging his fingers. Alvis obligingly lifted her into the air and smiled to himself as she giggled over the ride.

A banging on their bedroom door startled them out of the moment. Alvis flung both Nephele and the cell phone into the open desk drawer, though his quick reflexes proved unnecessary. The door did not open.

"Uchen'ka," called his master from the other side. "Breakfast. Come down."

"I'm coming!" Alvis straightened his ruffled clothes and held his breath, listening hard. His master's heavy footsteps lingered outside for only a moment, then rumbled back across the living room and down the ancient stairs.

Alvis breathed a sigh of relief and peered into the desk drawer. Nephele lay upside-down in her "nest" of shiny baubles and old clothing scraps. She flailed her limbs and squealed her complaints like a baby bird. Alvis smiled apologetically and set her back upright before retrieving the phone.

Mara's message lingered on the screen. It was now or never.

Alvis studied the sigil one last time. Finding its static, he settled at last on four words. "A warning. Be safe."

He hit "send," trusting that this odd device would get the message to its proper home. He shut off the machine, pocketed it, and swiftly herded Nephele back in before she could crawl out of the drawer.

"Stay put," he told her, whispering in case his master returned. "You need to stay in here today. All right? You can't let my teacher see you."

Nephele sniffed, chin shaking and eyes swelling with tears. Alvis ached even though he knew it to be mostly an act. Nephele loved people so much, but being alone wouldn't break her heart. It was for her own good. He couldn't risk his master taking her away.

"Don't cry. It'll only be a few hours." He offered his fingers for a brief, makeshift hug and ducked in quick to peck her tiny cheek. "I promise, you'll be okay. Now be good."

Mollified, Nephele curled up on a handkerchief with her favorite shiny bead and started examining her own reflection in its surface. Alvis closed her little drawer, donned his lab coat on the way downstairs and appeared in the kitchen, panting from the effort of his run.

His master barely glanced up, hunkered as always over his pile of fried spam and previously-powdered eggs. Faigel perched on the bookshelf overhead and in the center of the cleared-off kitchen table sat a chessboard -- the tri-colored mason's chessboard that usually stood in the great room.

"Finally," said Darius, tapping the game board with his fingers. "It is your move."

Alvis brightened. Games were good for the mind and chess in particular often mimicked meditation. Playing meant that this teacher was in a good mood. They were closer over chess than almost anything else.

He took his seat behind black, the only sound being the crunch of burnt meat and Faigel's occasional shifts. Alvis soon slipped so deep into the game that he barely touched his food, his mind lost in the pattern of pawns, rooks, and knights. His aura expanded and met that of his teacher, which seemed more at peace than it had been for months.

A very good morning indeed.

When Darius finally spoke again, it was while Alvis was busy contemplating an encounter between his own knight and the white queen. The master alchemist tossed his empty

plate to one side and reached into the lining of his coat, saying, "I had the opportunity last night to examine your work from the past week."

Alvis glanced up, but quickly refocused on the board. Keeping focus during a conversation would serve him well in not getting distracted by his work. "Oh?"

"Yes. I was particularly impressed by these."

Alvis looked up for real this time. His stomach sank when he saw three thin, pencil-shaped vials perched in his master's scarred hands. "I-I can explain..."

"I hoped that you would." Darius rolled two of the vials into his palm and held the third up to the sunlight. "I thought I instructed you not to use the forge alone."

Alvis swallowed anxiously and nudged his bishop into place, half-hoping for a distraction of his own. "You did. I didn't use the forge."

"Then how did you seal these?"

"A Bunsen burner and some tweezers."

"That is remarkable."

Alvis's jaw nearly hit the table. Whatever he'd been expecting, that was not it. There was real admiration in his master's dark eyes. His earth-strong aura rippled with...was that pride?

"To make use of the tools at your disposal without dwelling on what you lack is good. And the work is excellent; smooth and solid without disrupted contents."

"Oh, but they were disrupted!" Alvis did not bounce in his seat, but it was a near thing. That ripple was pride. He'd done good work. His teacher was proud! "The final heating phase burned off excess particles. I made the seal at the same time."

"The Arsames Technique." His master nodded, giving the vial in his hand a light shake. "It is good that you found that volume. Such additional studies will serve you well."

Hope alighted in Alvis's stomach as light as the sparks that floated within the vial. If this study was good then maybe he'd been wrong about Nephele. Maybe his teacher would love her too.

"And the contents?" Darius asked, moving the vials into one hand and carefully laying them on the table.

"It's vitirol. Plus copper essence and amber resin. It holds an electric charge and vaporizes in air, so when the glass breaks..."

Cold.

The rippling pride stilled, leaving his master's aura as solid and fragile as a block of ice. Alvis caught his breath, mind racing. What did he say?

Darius took a deep breath in through his nose. "This technique," he said through thin lips. "This formula. Where did you find it?"

"I--" Alvis nearly swallowed his own tongue. It came from the early pages of his father's log, and too late he realized that that had been his mistake. "Nowhere. I made it myself. Through experiments."

His master's nostrils flared. Alvis knew he must smell the lie in his aura. He hadn't even tried to cover it, in his haste. Stupid.

Darius stood without another word, dropping his breakfast plate into the sink with such a clatter that Faigel took flight with a disgusted squawk. The master stormed upstairs and Alvis, breathless, scrambled to follow him.

He made it to the second floor as Darius flung open the door to his room. By the time he reached the door, his teacher had a hand on the desk drawer. Nepehele's drawer.

"Teacher, wait! I can explain!"

Too late. Darius yanked the drawer from its place and dumped the contents onto the desk. Handkerchiefs, torn shirts, buttons and baubles spilled onto the wood. Old marbles clattered to the floor and rolled. But there was no squawk, no burst of aura, no sign of Nephele.

Alvis wavered on his feet, grabbing hold of the door frame to keep the whirlpool of his confusion from dragging him to the floor. He scanned the room, finally catching a glimpse of his creation on the bookshelf above his bed. She cowered behind Plato's Timaeus, staring wild-eyed at the monster who destroyed her nest.

"Where is it?" Darius spared barely a glance at Alvis before yanking the other drawer from the desk. He dumped it, stripped the small shelf above the desk, then moved to the dresser. "Where have you put the book where you learned that technique?"

"Here. It's here!"

Alvis dashed to the messenger bag at the foot of his bed, dragging out the leather-bound volume. His master snatched it up and tore through the pages without care. He swore under his breath in Russian and began to pace. Alvis pressed against the bed to avoid him. Nephele disappeared entirely behind her books.

"Where did you get this?"

"I...found it."

"Yes, but where?"

"In the library." Technically under it, but the half-truth was enough to keep hidden in his aura.

The teacher swore again and bit his thumb. His teeth sawed at the nail. He flipped pages again until he found the flash-bang formula, which lay only a few sections into the text. "How much of this did you read?"

All of it.

Alvis focused on keeping his aura steady while also keeping his face blank. "Just the beginning."

That mollified his master somewhat, his aura settling from an earthquake to tremble. The tremors lingered as he muttered to himself, almost growling. Alvis waited until they were nearly gone before he spoke again.

"I don't understand what I did." Alvis's throat threatened to claw back up itself and turn inside-out in his mouth, but he swallowed the fear. Mara wouldn't back down, not for this. He hadn't done anything wrong. "You said I could learn from every book in the library."

He expected the earthquake to return. It didn't. There was a light shudder that his master's body did not reflect. Then, he closed the book.

"Yes," he said. "Every book in the library. Except this."

He held the log aloft, as though he were afraid both to drop it and to touch it. His aura, now rock-solid, betrayed none of his thoughts.

"If you find anything by this man again, do not read it. Bring it to me."

"But... why?"

"He is dangerous."

"...He was my father."

Darius stared at him. Alvis ducked his head and made himself small as possible. He didn't want to push too far.

"I suppose that thing is true," said the master at last. He moved as though to place the book in his coat. Stopped. Continued to hold it, careful and weary. "We must clean."

Alvis glanced to the mess that now covered his desk.

"I will take the kitchen."

"... Yes, sir."

Darius left the room more slowly than he'd entered still carrying the old journal like a live bomb. Alvis listened to him descending the stairs, then went to the banister and listened again to hear the lock open and close on the study door. His father's journal was out of his reach now. Possibly for good.

He returned to his room, closed the door, and knelt on the bed. Nephele continued to cower. When he moved to Plato, she scrambled for cover behind Dickens instead.

"It's okay," said Alvis, patting the shelf lightly to coax her. "You can come out now. He's gone."

Nephele stuck her head out first, then ran to the edge of the shelf and leapt at her creator. She burrowed into his clothes for comfort and sobbed, her entire body trembling like a newborn kitten.

Alvis held her close and whispered soothing words, even as his mind tripped over itself to recall everything he'd learned from his father's work. Had it truly been dangerous? He'd scoured every inch of that journal, yet nothing stood out to him as broken or wrong. It had been mostly variations on old techniques, modern improvements to ancient processes, especially in creating constructs. How was that any different from what he'd learned from his master?

He would need to get up soon. Clean his room, return downstairs for that day's instruction. Maybe they could return to the comfortable Sunday of his teacher's original plans. Most likely though, they would not.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A manila folder labeled **Permanent Student Record** slammed onto the Principal Faulkner's desk with a heavy *thump*.

Mara stared at it, refusing to lift her head. It had to be an intimidation tactic. Nobody used paper files anymore. It was probably full of blank printer sheets and recycled scraps.

She would not let it get to her. She would not give Faulkner that satisfaction.

"You, young lady, are in a lot of trouble."

In the back of her mind, Mara found herself wondering if the teacher disciplinary meetings would be any easier with parental back-up. This never happened back home. Everyone knew everyone and everyone especially knew her father, so any wrong-doing had only resulted in a well-timed phone call home. Here, her parents were four hundred miles north and clueless. They might not even know until she'd been expelled and was on the plane back.

Mara's only defense against that eventuality came from Mr. Petrov. As head of her kin, it fell to him to serve a pseudo-parental role, which was why he sat beside her today in his neat

dress shirt and pressed slacks. He'd kept his eyes forward so far, hands folded calmly over his crossed legs.

On Mara's other side sat Ms. Applegate, who looked distressed and rather out of place. She held a file of her own, though hers was actually real; it contained photocopies and pictures of all the art Mara had made over the last year and a half.

Principal Faulkner completed their set. He sat behind an ostentatiously large and heavy desk without a hair out of place or a stray thread on his black suit. His expression was carefully blank, but his aura told another story: it crackled triumphant like a wildfire, drowning out the other teachers' sounds. Mara could barely hear her own aura, it was so dominating. She focused on her breathing to keep it low, so she wouldn't be swept away.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" Faulkner's hand lingered on the supposed file. The light of his shredder blinked, an unspoken but empty threat.

Mara shrugged. "Dunno. Don't know why I'm here. Is it against school rules to be attacked in your dorm?"

Faulkner snorted. "More like doing the attacking." His words hung thick as wildfire smoke. When they didn't get a reaction he pressed on. "Ms. Smoke was the only one hurt. No one else could have entered or left that room except the two of you. And then there's the matter of your repeated vandalism..."

"I didn't do that." Mara clasped one hand with the other to ground herself and glared against the pale Monday morning sun. "I didn't hurt Silena. I didn't know about the bathroom until that night, either."

"So you claim." Faulkner raised a single thin eyebrow in a way that probably took him years of practice to perfect. "But the fact is, those occult symbols used in the attack match those

found in the trophy hall last week. And you remain the only student to have any connection to such occult nonsense. Isn't that right, Ms. Applegate?"

"Well - yes." The art teacher gave Mara an apologetic look, fumbling with the contents of her folder. "But it originates in work that's quite atypical for her usual style--"

"In short," said Faulkner, cutting the woman off with a dismissive wave. "We should have nipped this in the bud while we had the chance. Now that it's progressed to violence I will not be making that mistake again."

Mr. Petrov cleared his throat. He lay a hand on top of the paperwork Faulkner had been reaching for, pinning it to the desk so it couldn't be retrieved. "Now hold on, Andrew. What does Silena have to say about all this?"

To reach the desk, he had to lean across Mara, close enough that she could finally pick the sound of his own aura out from the other background noise. Nearly silent, it reminded her of a cool breeze's whisper on a hot summer day.

Faulkner's responded with a crack of annoyance, like popping wood in a fire. "I don't see how that's relevant."

"I do. That's why I spoke to her this morning."

Petrov pinned the bureaucracy beneath a paperweight and settled back in his chair as though they were having only a pleasant conversation over brunch.

"Nothing in her account of the assault would implicate Mara in any way. She is adamant that her attacker was not Mara, but a third party, which also explains the vandalism on the outside of the dormitory door."

"And where is this 'third party?' You were there at the time, Solomon. How did the perpetrator escape?"

"That's a fine question." Petrov raised neither his voice nor his gaze, fiddling instead with the large ring he wore on the middle finger of his left hand. "One that will require a thorough investigation. I'm willing to take responsibility for that."

"Are you." Faulkner snorted his non-question, throwing himself back in his fine leather office chair. "Seems to me far more likely that Ms. Edenshaw terrorized Ms. Smoke to the point that she is afraid of speaking out."

"That may well be true."

Mara sat up straight, her jaw dropping. Petrov was supposed to be on her side. Yet before she could raise a protest, those pale eyes caught her gaze and the man raised a hand from his knee in a silent plea to stand down.

"Nevertheless," Petrov cleared his throat. "It's written in our disciplinary policy that students are to be considered innocent until proven guilty, just like in the real world, and any doubt in that regard is not definitive proof of guilt. Expulsion without that proof is grounds for a discrimination lawsuit -- one which I imagine to be swift coming given Mr. Edenshaw's connections in Anchorage and Juneau."

Mara's heart crumpled to ash and sank right down to her toes. Using her father's position to get out of trouble was the last thing she'd ever wanted to do, but words could not be taken back now. Faulkner's aura flared with barely-suppressed fury, then dyed down to a low, steady burn.

"There will still be consequences," he hissed through his teeth. "Someone must be held responsible."

Petrov nodded his assent. Mara sank back in her chair. She would not be going home today, but it didn't feel much like a victory at all.

#

Mara emerged from the principal's office with a three-day class suspension, a black mark on her (real) permanent record, and the complete loss of her off-campus privileges for the rest of the semester. Which was fine. She could put up with all of it. Better than leaving for good. But, only barely.

From here she was meant to go straight back to her dorm and commence the "grounding," but before she could reach even the end of the hall a voice called her name.

"Mara. Hold on."

Petrov. He ambled towards her while Ms. Applegate hurried in the opposite direction. Even now, Petrov remained so calm and composed that it pissed Mara off.

He settled alongside her, arms folded behind him as though attempting to be as nonchalant and un-threatening as he could. "I'd like to speak with you privately. In my office, please."

Latent gratitude for his support and a begrudging respect for authority won out over Mara's desire to tell him where he could stick it. She followed him through the cluttered halls of the Admin Building, ducking into his shadow whenever they passed another adult.

Somehow, Petrov had managed to snag himself a corner office, naturally smaller than the principal's but still roomy compared to other instructors. Two of the walls held windows and the third a massive set of redwood shelves that reminded Mara of the library. Heavy books, plastic binders, and the occasional basket filled every available space, save for a table beneath the left-hand window, which held a single-serve coffee machine and a collection of glossy mugs.

"You want some coffee?" Petrov went straight for the machine, selecting a plastic cup for himself and passing the basket to Mara. "There's also tea, if you prefer."

Mara picked through the selection, suspiciously eying the labels of hazelnut mocha and honeyed green tea until she found one that looked like straight coffee. Petrov took it from her with a knowing nod, his own cup already brewing as he spoke. "I'm sorry if I upset you back there. I understand how relying on your father's influence would rub you the wrong way, but Andrew is a stubborn man and he's oddly set on the course of blaming you for everything. It's better to swallow a bit of pride than accept expulsion for a crime you didn't commit."

Mara kept her mouth shut, sinking into the unusually plush chair Petrov provided for students. She'd half-expected the whole routine with Faulkner to have been an act, perhaps an attempt to preserve Petrov's reputation as an educator while still holding her accountable behind closed doors. But it seemed he truly believed in her. How oddly reassuring.

The little coffee maker completed its work within a minute, producing a mug of black coffee that Petrov passed her along with sugar packets and cream.

"So then," he said, settling behind his desk with the mug of his own. "About what happened Saturday night. I'd like to hear your side of the story."

Mara avoided his eye and tried her coffee black. Its bitterness drew a scowl that she couldn't quite hide. "Don't see the point. You asked Silena."

"I did. And you know what she told me?"

That was the problem. Mara didn't have a clue. Silena had no reason to lie about what she'd seen, but the idea that she'd told the truth and been believed was utterly ridiculous.

"Silena claims that the two of you were attacked that night by multiple small creatures, which came up through the bathroom drains and looked like -- quote -- 'killer bone dolls covered in the hides of skinned squirrels.'"

Mara dropped an entire sugar packet into her mug. Petrov's patient tone hadn't wavered even once in that entire description. It held not a hint of doubt or mockery, nor had his expression become anything like a smirk. He believed it.

As though he could read her mind, his lips twitched into a smile. He took a long sip of coffee and set it aside, reaching into a drawer on the right side of his desk. "She then went on to say that you, without hesitation, came to her defense against the attackers and eventually scared the creatures away. She was quite adamant that you not be held responsible for the injuries, yet seemed confused as to how you managed to summon a bolt of lightning directly into your dorm room." He placed something on the desk between them and closed the drawer, turning to face Mara fully once again. "Meanwhile, I happened to find this on your side of the bedroom floor. I hope you don't mind my collecting it for safe-keeping."

He spread his hands, revealing the two halves of a sealed glass vial, splintered down the middle. Its pale glass filtered just enough light to stain the wood with absinthe.

"This is recycled glass," said Petrov, slowly rolling the fragments between two fingers. "Home-made. You don't see that around just anywhere these days."

His pale eyes flickered from the vial to Mara and back, as inscrutable as always. He turned one half towards her, tapping it once to indicate the mark etched below its sealed tip.



"Contained power," he muttered. Turning the other half, he did it again.



"Electricity. The power of lightning, tamed." He sighed, taking his fingers from the glass and fidgeting again with the rings on his right hand. "I haven't seen work like this in many years. Save, of course, for that I made myself."

Mara stared at his ring, the one on the middle finger of his right hand. Larger and more ornate than the others, she'd always assumed it to be a class ring. Now she knew better. It matched the one that Alvis wore around his neck.

"You're an alchemist."

Petrov nodded, subtle and amused. "So I am. And so, I suspect, are you."

Mara found her voice missing, so she couldn't correct his mistake. Mental pieces fell into place one after another, unearthing new answers for her to stumble over and flail. Why he always stood up for her. Why he'd been convinced that the trophy room wasn't her doing. His aura, so discreet and controlled. Solomon Petrov. Qalu's King.

It all fit.

"You're quite lucky, you know." Petrov returned to his mug, fingers settling loosely around the warm ceramic. "If I hadn't been teaching here, or if Elsa hadn't recognized your quintessence flaring due to that poison..."

"Atigtalik is an alchemist too?"

"Of a sort, yes." His obliging smile told her that was all she would get for now. "The point is, if we hadn't been here, there would have been no chance for anyone else to stabilize you. You'd have burnt yourself up like an unattended candle. Hence, lucky."

He paused, peering thoughtfully into the settling pool of his drink. His aura thrummed softly, the slightest show of weakness. Perhaps for Mara's sake.

"At the time, I assumed you'd smoked something you shouldn't have." He held up a hand to stop her objection. "Believe me, you wouldn't have been the first. In any case, that was before you started drawing." He lifted his mug, turning those all-seeing gray eyes to her through the haze of rising steam. "I had assumed that your memories would return with time. Allowing you that seemed the most natural course. But then, we had that incident in the trophy hall..."

Mara lurched forward, her heart alight. At last. Answers. "It had to be those constructs. Right? Like in my dorm. They wrecked the bathroom too. What are they? And why is this--"

"Mara, please."

In her excitement, Mara splashed half her mug of coffee on the desktop. She retrieved a napkin from the side table and sheepishly mopped up. "Sorry. I just don't understand."

Mr. Petrov sighed, waiting until she'd cleared the puddle to return his mug to the desk. "I don't know all the details myself. But I will attempt to clarify where I can."

Here he paused, fingers resting against warm porcelain as he again collected his thoughts. Once they settled, he cleared his throat. "You know of course that this school once belonged to the Bureau of Indian Affairs."

Mara nodded and settled back. To begin there meant that this would be a long story indeed.

"That was forty, almost fifty years ago now." Petrov frowned. The wrinkles in his eyes and brow grumbled, 'God but I'm old.' "At the time, while the former base was still being redesigned, a respected master alchemist pulled a number of strings to have himself installed as headmaster. The grounds were even more isolated then than they are now and students were not permitted to leave. Too much outside interference may have distracted from their... assimilation."

He said the word the way a lot of white people did, as though it had a funny taste. Over a hundred years and still so many refused to admit that "Kill the Indian" had once been the law of the land.

"These factors -- along with a steady supply of human subjects -- made this school the perfect location for large-scale alchemical experiments."

Mara's stomach dropped, ears ringing with her father's voice: *Project Chariot* and *iodine-131*.

"Experiments... on the students?"

"Of a sort." Petrov sipped his drink to gather his next thought. "You mentioned constructs before. Do you know what homunculi are?"

Mara nodded. How nice it would be now to have Nephele lighten the mood.

"This alchemist, the headmaster, sought to perfect the process of homunculi creation. Fresh genetic material eases the process. Moreover, his creations were more or less human, including in size, and people tend to question when fully-grown strangers appear and disappear without warning. Among the students here, they were well-hidden."

Mara chewed her bottom lip. "Disappear?"

"An inevitability. Without proper maintenance, all homunculi eventually break down; hence the imperfection in the process. No entirely pure, entirely human construct has ever lasted more than five years." A look of pain passed over Petrov's face. He closed his eyes. "I'm sure you can imagine the horror this caused the human students. To witness their classmates rotting alive..."

Mara shuddered. She could picture it all too well.

"Others rotted first in the mind. They became violent and crazed. Rumors spread, but such incidents were classified as a disease and led to a quarantine. It isolated them even further, exactly as the headmaster wished."

"What finally stopped it?"

"A child died."

Mara gulped. Her father had ranted and raved about the diseases in his attempts to keep her from coming. But death? A student's death was new.

"Moreover," continued Petrov with a sigh. "The death was clearly murder. No disease could strangle a boy in the library."

"It all fell apart after that. Within two years, the school had been shut down and nearly all the headmaster's alchemical creations destroyed. Or so I believed, until I found Qalu."

That confirmed what Mara had suspected all along. "You were there."

"I was. That alchemist was my teacher and I, his apprentice." Ever steady, his aura hummed with what Mara guessed must be regret. "I was thirteen when first we came. At the time, I believed my master incorruptible. Though I realized my mistakes with time, I possessed neither the power nor the courage to stop him."

"I suppose I've been atoning ever since. Preserving Qalu was step one, after she survived the master's purge." With a knowing smile, he stood and made his way to the coffee maker again. "I know you've met her. She visited last night."

"When the school reopened, I applied for this job. I suppose I always suspected that the past would someday return. Though I admit, nothing could quite have prepared me for what's happened."

Mara watched his every move, the flames of her mind stoked to boiling as she followed his train of thought. "You think a homunculi's causing all this trouble. One of the human-sized ones from back then."

"Homunculus. And yes, that seems the strongest possibility."

"How'd it stay alive?"

"Same as Qalu, I imagine: through blended genetic techniques and alchemical repair."

Petrov added a packet of sugar to his drink, stirred it with a spoon, and tapped the last drops off on the side of his mug. "That would also be how it created those smaller constructs."

"And now it's tearing up the school because of me."

"Teenagers and your narcissism." Petrov chuckled, mostly to himself. "I have no idea why that creature reappeared now. But Saturday does prove that it seems to be targeting you. You'll need to be very careful from now on."

Mara nodded, though it wasn't like she needed the warning. She'd gotten enough friends hurt as it was.

"I mean it, Mara. I have a contact who should be both willing and able to help us deal with this situation, but until it's done you can't afford to put even a toe out of line. If there's another incident, I won't be able to cover for you. Understood?"

Another nod.

"Good. More coffee?"

Mara shook her head and handed the mug over to be washed. God knew she didn't need any more caffeine in her system. She'd be lucky to sleep tonight as it was.

Petrov settled back in his creaking chair, all the more relaxed now that their tense conversation was winding down. Apparently, all the caffeine only served to put him at ease.

"I've one last question, if you don't mind."

Mara cocked her head to one side.

"Do you intend to learn more alchemy from here on? In a practical sense."

"I..."

Mara hesitated. Truth be told, she hadn't considered that possibility, but now that she did it was appealing. The consistent hum of her own aura had become a comfort, a reminder that she was still alive, and the power that rushed through her when she summoned lightning felt so good. The barest glimpse she'd received of Alvis's creations left her reeling. There was possibility here for art unlike any the world had ever seen.

But the history of Mount Vilna gnawed at the back of her mind. If she pursued this "sacred science," would that make her the same the old headmaster?

In the end, she shrugged. "I don't know."

Petrov nodded, half to her and half to himself. "Perhaps we should talk again, then. Once this is all over."

Despite herself, Mara smiled. "I think I'd like that."

#

First period was nearly over when their impromptu meeting adjourned. Mara had one foot in the empty hall when a thought struck her and she whirled around. "Sir? There's one more thing."

Petrov glanced up, busy as he was gathering the notes for his second-period class. "Mm?"

"I have this friend. I think he's in trouble." It was such a cliché that Mara winced at her own bumbling, but there was no time to hesitate so she pressed on. "Every time I see him, he's hurt. He lived with this man, his 'teacher,' who keeps him locked up. Says he's not allowed to see anyone. Ever."

"Then how did you meet him?"

Mara bit her tongue. Even if the poisoning had been an accident, she somehow doubted that Petrov would want to help if he knew Alvis had caused it.

"Is he the one who told you about alchemy?"

That seemed safe enough. Mara nodded.

Petrov made a thoughtful noise, rising from his chair with an armful of graded assignments. "This is likely to be a delicate issue. You know that rushing in with these accusations could put your friend in danger."

"Yes. But..." Mara squared her shoulders and willed her aura to burn steady and strong. "If I got him here, could he stay? He'd be safe with us."

Petrov sighed. "I can't make any promises," he said. "But if you can bring him here to talk... I will do what I can."

It wasn't much. But it would do for the moment.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Retrieving the sea-water for purification was a chore that Alvis liked and loathed in equal measure. He loathed it because the buckets were heavy, the return trip arduous, and he often required a wash afterward to scrub off the lingering brine. He liked it because the sound and smell of the sea brought him close comfort and it was the one time -- weather permitting -- that he could most clearly see the City of Latea across the Sound.

The last two days had been foggy with rain, but this Monday afternoon saw clear sky and a clear sea, much to his relief. Fishing boats came and went from the crowded dock, a handful of cars pattered along forgotten roads, and he could even catch the occasional movement from individual people through the glass-plated windows of storefronts and snapping ropes of sailboat lines. Standing at the edge of his island's rickety dock, Alvis could have watched the city move and live all day, but his master would grow impatient soon, so he didn't dare linger too long.

With a private sigh, he knelt to lower the bucket to the sea...

...and promptly dropped it with a squawk as a familiar head broke the waves' surface.

"Qalu! What the hell?"

The chimera giggled and dove again, reappearing with Alvis's bucket, which she held aloft. Her long hair pooled behind her like squid ink, hiding most of her body from view. She still had the wrapping he'd given her shoulder. Despite the water, it continued to hold strong.

"Oh, no no no no no." Alvis groaned, hoisting the heavy bucket from her webbed hands. "Qalu, you can't be here."

She chortled again, like a dolphin.

"I mean it! My master hunts things like you. If he sees you here--"

A splash to the face cut him off. By the time his sputtering stopped, Qalu had moved to safe shade of the dock's opposite side. Webbed fingers gripped the old planks and her dark eyes glinted with mischief. She was handing him a doll.

No, wait...not a doll.

Alvis adjusted his glasses, switching from one focus to the other to be sure of what he saw. What Qalu offered him was a tiny, twisted corpse, perhaps six inches tall, with a humanoid form but proportions that made him wince. Its fragile epidermis peeled away like potato skin, revealing black flesh bloated by seawater and exposed copper joints held together with twisted wire. Even without its head, it perfectly matched Mara's description of the tiny homunculi that had attacked her.

Gingerly, Alvis took the creation from Qalu. It smelled worse than the digester on a hot summer day. "Where did you get this?"

Qalu splashed again, this time to clean the clinging rot from her hand. "Bad place," she said. She bobbed back on the waves to indicate Metharme, then lowered a claw to the dark algae and scratched a simple sign:



"Earth," Alvis translated. "These were underground?"

Qalu chittered, nodded. It made sense. Mara said they came through plumbing. All plumbing eventually led underground.

He gingerly turned the corpse peering down the exposed spine. If you could call it that. Rather than a series of vertebrae, the thing better resembled a twisting braid of telephone wire. It looked like it could barely move.

"What happened to its head?"

Qalu bared her sharp teeth, stained with a similar black. Then spat. "Nasty."

"I bet."

Alvis chuckled. He glanced towards the house to be sure they were alone (they were) and reached into the pocket of his lab coat. He drew out the prototype for one of today's projects, the half-porcelain, half-copper shell of a constructed mollusk-to-be, and offered it to Qalu in trade.

"Thank you."

Qalu cheered thanks of her own in some native tongue and snatched the half-shell with unmitigated delight. She peppered his hand with affectionate kisses and back-flipped into the waves, popping up a few feet out to wave an enthusiastic goodbye.

Alvis watched her go. Then, bucket in one hand and corpse in the other, he returned to his home.

#####

He found his master as he'd left him: poring over paperwork in the great room. A mug of long-cold coffee and an English dictionary lay ignored on the side table while Darius scoured over his pages and grumbled words under his breath. His aura growled with him, like the warning of mountains before a mudslide. It hadn't settled after their confrontation, not even after an entire day.

Faigel, settled in her cage near the entry-hall door, regarded Alvis with disgust when he entered from outside. That mild loathing turned to revulsion and fear the moment she saw what he carried. She shrieked her deafening mix of a dove's cry and a raven's squawk while taking flight, scattering newsprint shreds in her white-feathered flurry. The commotion startled Darius to his feet and overturned the mug, spilling cold coffee across his work.

Alvis cringed from the carnage, instinctively retreating a step from where he'd come. "I'm sorry, teacher."

His master snarled at him, swore beneath his breath, and mopped the mess as best he could with scrap paper. Alvis should have gone for a mop to help, but given the mess he carried it would only cause more trouble. He reclaimed his lost steps, opened the kitchen door so Faigel could escape, and approached his master with hands outstretched.

"I found something. Thought you should see."

A sour glare became a double-take. The master's eyes grew wide as he took in the twisted corpse, its obscene proportions, and its black, rotted flesh.

Alvis breathed a sigh of relief. This foul creation couldn't be a good thing, but at least it distracted his teacher from the dark mood he'd carried since uncovering Alvis's secret journal.

"This washed up near the docks."

Mess forgotten, Darius took the homunculus off Alvis's hands. He lay it on its back and breathed through clenched teeth, rasping short shudders as though he'd been handed the corpse of a human child.

"It looks recently dead," offered Alvis, with what helpful cheer he could force. The long silences made him nervous and his teacher's aura had gone frustratingly still. "Not well-made, either. Shoddy craftsman. Where do you think it--"

Darius shoved past Alvis and stormed into the kitchen. Faigel shrieked her further protest, only to be shooed off with a sweep of the master's arm. She fled for the stairs, her pride wounded. Alvis had never seen his teacher brush her off before.

His master flung a plastic cutting board onto the counter and unceremoniously dumped the homunculus corpse on top of it. He pinned it by the waist and raked his fingers down the torso, stripping away thick sloughs of rotted meat that he flung into the sink.

Alvis cupped a hand across his mouth and nose, only to be reminded of the rot that had flaked onto him. He ran for the sink. The gauze on his fingers had to be stripped away with his nails.

Meanwhile, his master reached the last layer of meat still intact and turned to butchering it off with a steak knife. It missed Alvis by an inch when he flung it away. In the next breath, Darius ripped a drawer from its place, dumped the contents onto the stove, and dug through it with one hand. He took neither his palm nor his gaze off the subject, as though he expected it to rear back to life even without its head.

Finally, he found what he wanted: a can opener without handles or gears, just a jagged claw and curved blade. This he plunged into the creature's "ribcage" -- now revealed as a solid

copper tube welded clumsily to the phone-cord spine -- and wrenched it down the center from sternum to navel.

Alvis watched in horror, dripping rot into the sink, his lunch threatening to come back up with each breath. His master sometimes brought dead subjects home, citing a need to "know his enemy," but he'd never seen the dismantling process in person. His mind flooded with visions of Nephele in the monster's place. Or Qalu. Or...

The can opener joined the knife in the skin, freeing the master's hands to wrench the ribcage wide open. Darius snarled like a predator over his kill, plucking one piece from the depths with two fingers.

He held it to the light, revealing a distorted pebble the color of oil on a dead bird. Alvis knew it must be the dead's Heartstone, but it looked nothing like the ruby-red crystal he'd placed in Nephele. This one could only be described as disgusting, twisted and foul. Pure evil.

"As expected," Darius muttered, much more to himself than to his charge. He took a test-tube from his coat, dropped the stone inside, capped it, and only then seemed to recall that he had an audience.

Alvis recoiled from his master's gaze. Yesterday's burns still hadn't healed. He hid their violent red against his shirt as best he could.

Darius looked from him to the corpse and back with nostrils flared. His barrel chest heaved. Viscera and rot dripped from his hands.

"Go." He jerked his head towards the guest room. "Go clean. Keep an eye on the processes for today, yes? I must...there is more I need to do."

Alvis nodded and hurried into the great room, making it out of his master's sight before his knees gave way and he slipped to the floor. He buried his face in a couch cushion and forced

himself to breathe, to push the images away, to think of anything but those claws hands stripping Nephele to the copper bones while she screamed and screamed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Whispers rustled like wind through fall leaves, dimming the mess hall's usual roar to a soft rumble. Conversations fell silent as Mara approached and picked up once she'd passed, hurling sharp accusations only she could hear: "scary" and "crazy" and "a stone-cold bitch." She focused on her breathing to drown them out. Distance made that easier, so she tried not to hold it against the classmates who moved to avoid standing beside her in line.

Her suspension from regular classes had turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Silena may have only been trying to provoke Mara with the claims that others were convinced of her guilt, but going to and from meals these last two days had been enough to show her just how many of their classmates bought in to Faulkner's accusations. That she appeared to have also gotten away with attempted murder only worsened it all.

Mara did her best to ignore it, keeping a low profile just as Petrov had said. Sure, it irked her that the hall crowd parted when she passed through, and that Silena's little clique glared her out of the dorm commons, and that even her friends in the art club would find an excuse to move

tables as soon as she sat down. And yeah, it hurt -- burned like a hot oven hurt -- when she saw the painting she'd had on display in the art room torn to shreds with a pen knife. But this was high school. Showing weakness would only make things worse. So she sucked it up and filled her lunch tray without complaint. Petrov's contact couldn't put this nonsense to bed soon enough.

The only ones who hadn't bought into the moral myopia were -- thankfully -- Caden and Syd. They'd both came by her room the night before for a round of video games and, though they hadn't been around when she snagged her early breakfast, Mara was relieved to find them holding down the fort at an otherwise empty table near the back wall.

As she neared them, her ears caught a sound they hadn't before, a shift in her friends' auras. They still resembled steady drums and whistling winds respectively, but today they sounded newly in-tune with one another. They were harmonizing.

Still...the boys didn't look any different. Mara studied them both as she sat down and, finding no change, decided it must all be in her head. They did, however, shift their seating around to form a visual wall between her and the rest of the hall.

Mara allowed herself a small smile. "Thanks, guys."

"No prob." Sydney grinned, one cheek puffed out to hide the bite of burger he'd been gnawing a moment before. He gave the nearest table a wink that sent them skittering in shame, then rolled his eyes. "Sheesh. The way these guys act, you'd think you were sick again. And contagious."

Caden elbowed him under the table, which made Mara snort into her food. Syd's smirk just grew wider.

Caden turned back to Mara, adjusting his glasses with an affectionate sigh. "Can you come to the library after this?"

Mara shrugged. "I'm not banned from there yet. Why?"

"We found Alvis's dad."

Mara choked on her food.

Between bites, in low whispers, they told her the whole thing. Petrov's history class that morning had taken place in the library, to research the local history project that Mara had completely forgotten. Not finding what they needed online, Caden and Syd went into archives, where the school kept their yearbooks. That's where they found him, and that's where they took Mara once they'd finished their lunch.

The portrait was so easy to find that it was almost frustrating. It hung along the rear wall of the archives alongside two other portraits of principals past. But the name on the brown frame was unmistakable: Orvar Norling.

Mara stood before it, staring up at the painted face of a bespectacled man with fading blond hair and a tight, clever smile. Syd slid up alongside her while Caden hung back among the yearbooks with one eye on the library doors.

"See?" said Syd, sounding tremendously pleased. "Told'ja it was him. No mistake."

Mara nodded. Aside from the nameplate, she could see Alvis in the man's hair, in the curve of his jaw, and in the shape of his pale lips. No man and boy could look that similar without being father and son.

"I asked the librarian. Guy came before her time, but he must've been a big deal because they actually to have a second portrait lying around. It used to hang in the trophy hall..."

"...where it got shredded." Mara finished. That's why the name in Alvis's book had sounded so familiar. Every student in the school had passed that portrait a dozen times a day.

"What do we know about him?"

"Nada. Yearbooks only go back to Faulkner's first year."

Caden drifted closer, adjusting his glasses by the edge of the arm. He was the only one of them who didn't look completely out of place standing among the dusty old archival books. "We could ask Petrov."

Mara immediately shook her head. After all Petrov had done, she didn't want to overload him with too many mysteries at once. Besides, he was probably busy dealing with the mysterious missing monster, and she already had enough to work with on her own.

"If Alvis's dad was here, Alvis must have been here too, when he was little."

Caden shrugged. "Suppose it's worth a shot."

Syd nudged Mara with his shoulder. "You just want an excuse to drag him out of that house."

"So what if I do?"

She hadn't meant to snap at him, but his kind of ribbing took some getting used to. Syd raised his hands in mock self-defense and backed off, giving Caden a chance to step in again.

"The school only lets family visit. And you've lost that privilege."

"Then we sneak him in."

Syd snorted at that. "Blondie would stick out like a sore thumb. We've got maybe three white kids in our entire grade."

Mara scowled. A voice that sounded like Petrov warned her again about keeping a low profile.

"Hey, but here's an idea." Syd plucked a folded, violently orange flier out of Caden's shirt pocket and unfurled it with a snap of his wrist. Black block letters and smiling carved pumpkin

advertised the Halloween dance the next day. "School dances are open to Latea High kids. Claim him as your date and nobody'll think twice."

He pushed the flier at Mara, who gingerly accepted. In addition to neglecting her homework, it had completely slipped her mind that this Saturday was Halloween. The Friday night dance was only three days away.

She didn't actually object to the plan, but the amount of shit-eating in Syd's wide grin made her want to. He was so up to something. "And... what will you be doing?"

"Oh, we'll be there. As friends. Right, Cay?"

Caden turned his head, hiding his eyes behind his bangs. "Right."

Correction: *they* were up to something.

Mara glanced between them, but her suspicions were put on hold when she spotted Silena over Caden's head, pushing through the library door with an armful of books. It was the first time Mara had seen her roommate since Saturday night. An urge sized her so sudden that it trapped her words in her throat. She cleared it with a cough. "Thanks, guys. I need to..."

Caden glanced behind him and spotted Silena settling into the librarian's desk for her shift. Of course, he understood. "Go on. We'll see you later."

Mara nodded her thanks and, as the boys left for their next class, she made her way to the check-out where Silena was waiting.

#####

In the back of her mind, Mara had always known that Silena worked for the library, but she'd never seen her at it before. For once, Silena seemed in her element.

She didn't look up as Mara approached, too absorbed in multi-tasking between skimming a large book and signing into the computer with her left hand. She'd tucked her hair behind her shoulders, keeping it out of her way while still leaving it free enough to drape across the side of her face that might unnerve the patrons. If her hair had sustained any damage from the attack, it didn't show at all.

Not for the first time, Mara nursed an ember of jealousy for that thick ebon mane. Traditional or not, long hair was a pain in the ass and she enjoyed the freedom of changing her style without too much investment. But if her natural hair looked like Silena's, she might have considered growing it out.

She hovered uncertainly at the counter, well aware of how bad this could go. Before she could grab a book as an icebreaker, Silena glanced up.

Mara went stiff. "...Hey."

"Hey." Silena took off her glasses. "Come to gawk?"

"No, I--"

Silena swept her right hand through her bangs, prosthetic carefully retracted to avoid tangles. The lifted curtain revealed the right side of her face to be an angry red, with a gauze square taped over her missing eye as a patch. A neat row of surgical tape led down her cheek, running almost perpendicular to her old scars.

"Six stitches and a tetanus shot," she reported brightly. That alone was enough to shock Mara into silence. Silena shrugged. "I've had worse."

"They kept you two days for that?"

"Nah. I've been in Courtney Wallis's dorm."

Mara's spirit slipped. She didn't enjoy having a roommate, but being thought too dangerous to keep one was worse.

Silena seemed to sense this and rolled her one good eye. "Courtney insisted. She's being dumb. I'm coming back tonight." "And you?"

"I'm suspended."

"So I heard. Faulkner's a dick."

That got a laugh. Silena quirked her head to one side and returned her glasses to their rightful place. Her hand lingered on the wound. "You didn't do this."

Mara shook her head. "Still my fault."

"Bullshit. Don't be such a martyr."

Mara chuckled. Her hands had begun to itch, so she shoved them into her coat pockets to keep busy. "Listen... what you told Petrov..."

"I told the truth."

"Yeah. But why?"

Silena raised her un-scarred brow. "Why not?"

"Because it's crazy."

"Crazy truths are still truth. What matters is that they believed. This time."

She muttered the last words half under her breath, gaze dropping to the desk. Or, rather, to her partially-plastic hand.

Frowning, Mara straightened from her slouch and took a glimpse around. Finding no other librarians, she slipped around to the staff side of the desk and dragged one of the empty chairs to settle inches from Silena.

"I'll believe you," she said in a whisper. "It's only fair."

Silena looked doubtful, but Mara could practically hear the secret cracking beneath her aura's surface, desperate to escape. So she waited in patience silence, which didn't last too long before Silena, at last, took a deep breath and began:

"When I was kid, my dad used to take me out to the trapline.

"We'd go for a week at a time, just him and me and the dogs. Nights in the trapper's cabins. Days on the sled. It was tough for a kid, but... I liked it. I loved the woods and the open air and the trees. And I was so proud to bring those furs home.

"Then, this one night... I was ten. We were three days out, near the of the line, just getting ready for bed. That's when it came. The wechuge."

She let the word -- *way-chu-gay* -- hang in the air while she studied Mara with her one good eye. Searching for signs of disbelief, no doubt. Signs she wouldn't find. Mara had promised. And it wasn't as though a cannibal-spirit was any weirder than all she'd seen.

"It attacked the dogs first. Dad went out to calm them and found it tearing the throat from our lead. By the time I ran out with the gun, they were all dead and that thing had my father on the ground.

"I shot it three times. Once in the head. It kept coming. It took my eye and my fingers. And then it ran."

She settled back with a sigh, the old desk chair creaking with effort. Her good hand tugged the curtain of her hair, drawing it tight across her scarred face.

"Local search and rescue called it a wolf attack. Or a bear. Something rabid. They said I'd been dreaming or got too scared. But I saw it. It got this close." She held her thumb and forefinger maybe three inches from her own nose. "And I swear... it had black teeth. Like rusted iron."

Mara shivered, tightly clenching her own fists across her knees. "And your dad?"

"They flew him to Fairbanks. He didn't wake up for three months. And he hasn't spoken since." Silena dragged the half-prosthetic hand across her throat. "Throat damage. Crushed larynx. Among other things.

"After that, I couldn't take the woods anymore. The wide open spaces around our village...it was too big. So I came down here. The islands are small."

Mara reached out without quite knowing why, taking hold of the hand with its clicking joints and metal fingers. Its grip was uncanny, but it also reminded her of Nephele and Qalu. Silena waited until she didn't pull away to grip back.

"I am not going to ask what's going on," she said. "My life doesn't need any more weird. But if you ever need somebody to bitch with, I'm here."

Mara said, "You too," and changed the subject to homework so they'd both have something more normal on which to cling.

#####

Fourth period in full swing left the lawn empty as Mara headed back to her dorm. She followed the sidewalk with a recent check-out under her arm as a makeshift hall pass in case Faulkner caught her outside her "grounding." Her elbow kept it pinned to her side because her hands were occupied by her phone, where she was texting Alvis the plan for the weekend.

Truth be told, she missed the boy more than she ever expected to. It felt so stupid -- they'd texted almost every night and it'd been only four days. But she couldn't help it. She

worried for him, trapped with that gnarled old bastard all on his own. She wanted Alvis safe, and Nephele too, even if she had to trick them both into it. Friday couldn't come soon enough.

She was halfway to the dorm when she fired off the first message. It bounced back almost immediately. She tried again, with the same result. "Could not deliver."

The third attempt drew a curse. Damn unreliable cell towers! She gave up after a final try and tried calling instead. Though it might've been nice to hear Alvis's voice, she guessed that he wouldn't know how to set up the voice mail. Still, it'd be easier to explain their next plan over voice mail...

The line picked up halfway through the third ring.

Mara froze in mid-step, breath catching. She hadn't expected that.

Ragged breathing came through the line. There was a long moment of fumbling and air before a deep voice barked, "Kotoryy nazyvayet?"

Mara gulped. Fear slipped through her lips like smoke, breathing a single damning word. "Alvis?"

Silence. Then, with a snarl, Alvis's master barked back:

"Who. Are. You?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The lab had been silent. That was the worst part.

All morning, Alvis had been taking dictation while his master picked through the twisted mess that passed for a skeleton with the rest of the dead homunculus stripped away. It was not a happy arrangement. Alvis was meant to be sketching too, but he could barely look at the twisted mess of stick-figure limbs and phone-cord spine without seeing what had come before, which made his stomach try to claw its way up his throat. That negativity didn't belong in the lab. Neither did the oppressive aura that enveloped his master.

At least it had been peaceful. Their other processes, from salt water distillation to the long-term research, had been sealed up or shut down and moved from the lab proper to avoid contamination. It left no babbling tinctures or whispering burners or even the soft curl of construct vines on the windowsill. Only Darius's muttering, the low voice of the eternal athanor, and the scratching of Alvis's fountain pen remained.

Then the chirping came

It shattered their silence, metallic and sharp, trilling one note a dozen times and then doing it again after a short pause. Darius slammed his hand to the counter and jerked as though to use one copper stick of a femur for a weapon. His nostrils flared and his dark eyes locked on the source of the sound: the breast pocket of Alvis's coat.

Alvis sat frozen, his pen bleeding ink into the notes. Stupid. Stupid, stupid. He could've sworn that he'd set the cell phone to silent, Syd had walked him through the whole thing. It wasn't supposed to ring, but now it was, and he couldn't even make himself move to stop it.

As the machine trilled a third time, his master rounded the examination table. He gripped Alvis by the lapel and opened his coat, yanking the black box of the cell phone from his inside pocket. He held it at a distance, as though tempted to crush it, but instead pressed the button to answer and slowly lifted the device to his ear.

Alvis clenched his eyes shut. He wanted to run, but Darius kept a death grip on his coat. If only the floor or the furnace would swallow him whole.

"Who is this?" his teacher growled in Russian.

Alvis couldn't hear the response -- too soft, too tinny -- but he knew from his brief glance at the screen that it had been Mara. Peeking through one eye, he watched his master's lips curl back in to a savage snarl.

The question came in English this time, "Who. Are. You?" When the answer didn't come, Darius's raised his tone to a deafening shout. "Who are you?!"

Alvis heard a click from the phone, then silence, then a dial tone. Mara had hung up.

He found himself on his feet in the next breath, his master kicking the stool out from under him and dragging him up by the lapel. He thrust the phone under Alvis's nose and demanded, "Where did you get this?"

"It was--"

"Who called?"

"I don't--"

"Why does she know that name?"

Alvis worked his jaw, but the words wouldn't come. What could he say anyway? What excuse could possibly justify this? He held Darius's wrist with both hands and shut up, leaving the master to draw his own conclusions.

His teacher did not blink, staring through him with wild eyes. "You've disobeyed me," he hissed. "You brought people here. You allowed them to see you."

Alvis bit his lip, knowing his silence would speak to his guilt.

"Then you have betrayed me."

Alvis shook his head and kept shaking, the trembles resonating down his spine to rattle his arms and tremble his knees. Not betrayed, not really, not ever. He'd never meant for this to happen, but it had and he wasn't sorry but that wasn't betrayal so how could he make the man see? "Teacher, I didn't..."

With a guttural snarl, Darius shoved Alvis away and flung the cell phone to the floor with all his strength. It burst, spraying shrapnel across the concrete. His first gift from a friend gone, just like that. The shattering *pop* of splintered glass haunted Alvis's ears.

Alvis lurched back, covering his ears. He stumbled, fell, and thrust out a hand to catch himself, tumbling against the hot athanor walls. He smelled burnt skin and shoved away with a yelp, only for the master to seize him again, this time by the shoulders.

His teacher hauled him bodily from the lab, kicking open the door and tossing him into the hall like a sack of canned goods. Alvis caught himself on the wall and winced as the new burns tore open. He barely had time to turn before Darius was on him again.

"You stupid boy." The master shook him so hard it nearly rattled the glasses off his nose. "Have you no idea what you've done? You of all people should know better!"

His nails dug into Alvis's arms, threatening to rip through the coat and clothes to the skin beneath, and past that to the muscle, and past that to the bones. His bulbous nose nearly brushed his student's, letting Alvis see every gnarled detail of the sickle-scar that marred his face.

"How can I be expected to keep you, Viska, if I cannot trust you to listen to me?"

Alvis stared over his glasses, wide-eyed and unblinking. His master went statue-still, half-pinning him to the wall. Attempting to break free didn't occur to Alvis at all.

"Viska?" he asked instead, when the breath returned to him. "Teacher... who is Viska?"

Darius stopped breathing.

For the second time that day, they were interrupted by a phone. This one came through the heavy oak door down the hall. Alvis knew his master's office had a phone -- an old rotary thing built into the wall -- but so far as he knew, it wasn't connected to the local lines and couldn't call into the city. His master never used it to call out, either. The only calls it ever took came straight from the Order. They were not to be ignored.

Darius eyed Alvis, his expression now shifted from burning anger to a stony mask. He released the boy, leaving him propped against the wall. "Stay."

Alvis nodded, tucking his hands close so as not to aggravate the warm, tender new burns. His master strode to the door, fumbled the key, and unlocked it, the sound at last summoning Faigel in from the Great Room -- the office held her favorite perch, which she never missed the

opportunity to use. She flew ahead of the master as he pushed open the door, leaving it ajar as though to see Alvis where he stood. He needn't have bothered, as Alvis's knees were still too rubbery to even think of leaving his post.

His only move was to turn his head and watch as his teacher snatched up the ancient phone, answering in rough English. "Hello?"

Whoever was on the other end, their voice gave the master pause. His mask softened like kneaded clay and it seemed as though years were lifted from his face. Even the scar looked less gnarled, smoothing into the picture of pleasant surprise. "Solomon?"

Alvis caught only half of the whispered words as the conversation unfolded. He was less interested in eavesdropping than he was in watching his master. He'd never seen the man react this way, especially not when dealing with anyone from the Order. Superiors normally put him on the defensive. Not this one. This one brought the walls down.

The conversation was a long one, his master listening more than he spoke. At one point, he fished a notepad from his desk, started taking notes, and stopped glancing Alvis's way. If he'd been more like Mara, Alvis would've taken the chance to run. But he wasn't Mara, and trying to be like her was what got him in trouble in the first place.

Alvis was so caught up in his pity that he didn't notice when the call ended until his master had him by the arm again, dragging him up the stairs and through the library to his bedroom. Stopping at the door, Darius pushed Alvis inside with a rough shove between the shoulder blades. "We deal with this when I return. You will not leave this room. Understand?"

Alvis swallowed a stupid question and nodded, knowing better than to press his luck. Darius tossed a bottle of salve onto his bed and lingered long enough for a last disapproving scowl before slamming the door. A moment later, he locked it behind him.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Mara flew through the woods like a diving eagle, her boots pounding the trail in time with her heart. Every passing second pricked at her skin. Too slow. Too far. Too much in her way. She would never reach Alvis's island in time.

This would seal her own fate, too. She knew it. Sheer luck alone kept her from being seen as she fled the campus. Who knew how long it would be before someone noticed. Yet, she couldn't have stayed. Alvis, her friend, was in danger. Because of her. She had to put things right, though she didn't know how.

At last, she spotted the "gate" of parsnip vines and fallen trees. Its poison green stood out now that fall had set in and she knew what to look for. Despite burning protests from her muscles, Mara pulled her sweater sleeves over her hands and threw herself at the vines. She yanked. The vines yanked back. They curled tighter and pulled the leaning trees ever closer together.

Mara kept fighting. If she could break a few stands, the trees would do the rest. Leaves came away by the fistful, but their copper-wire core held strong. She was about to try something desperate (her teeth) when a rustle from overhead startled her back. She looked up just in time to see a broad-winged bird -- the white raven -- break from the trees over her head and take to the sky. Its magnificent long tail feathers trailed behind, shining iridescent in the noontime sun.

Mara caught her breath. In the quiet that followed, her ears caught the heavy thump of leaden feet on the opposite side of the trees.

That was all the warning she got before the vines caught fire, green vines bursting through them like a book of matches. Mara threw herself to one side, dodging under a particularly tense length of vine that snapped under the strain and missed her ear by an inch. She dropped into the underbrush, eyes shut against the threat of thorns or sticks, landing with her stomach pressed to the cold, wet earth.

The noise of her fall was thankfully lost to the cacophony of cracking fire and standing trees. Through the blaze strode a bear of a man, hardly waiting for the trees to clear his way. Mara risked peering up through the bush and knew him at once: Alvis's teacher.

Now more than ever, the man resembled a monster. Striding untouched through raining embers, his hands wreathed in green flame and his ruined coat billowing in the back-draft, he couldn't be human. He didn't even bother to collect the lingering fire or even set the "gate" to close behind him as he had before. His truck remained in the clearing, untouched, and he carried a massive bag across his shoulders that looked stuffed with weapons.

Mara searched his face from her low angle, looking for any evidence of what he'd done in the twenty minutes between the phone call and now. No use. She couldn't read his expression at

all through the massive scar that faced her as he passed. A wound like that made Silena's claw-marks look like tasteful tattoos. It must have festered. She hoped that it'd hurt.

She followed him with her eyes, watching him rub those thick gloves together and finally douse the flames they bore. He rolled his uneven shoulders, stepped past the walking trail onto the dirt road...and stopped.

Mara held her breath, hearing the man's aura as she'd once heard an earthquake, not as true sound but as vibrations that shook her from the inside. His face turned her way, at last exposing the half unmarred by the scar -- smoother, yes, but also twisted with age. Nostrils flared, his barrel chest expanded like a balloon. He stared, unblinking, into the tree-line. The gaze passed right above her head.

Mara pressed deeper into the brush, tangling her hands in rich earth and coiled weeds. With the man turned fully toward her, she could now clearly see the coat of arms on his coat, more complex than Alvis's sigil patch but too detailed for her to see clearly from afar. He raised a gloved fist and the earthquake grew stronger. Mara's teeth threatened to rattle straight out of her skull.

He took a step and swung, arm curving in a wide punch that struck a thick, old birch that stood at the edge of the road. The tree shattered, splintering first at the impact site and then cracking into massive fissures that split up and down the entire trunk. The largest bisected the entire tree length-wise and straight down the middle, making the wood shriek as though in pain.

Even ten feet away, Mara rattled from the reverb. She held her jaw shut too keep her teeth from chattering and hunkered down until chlorophyll filled her nose.

The poor tree shuddered and finally fell, splintering off its roots and into a dozen shards that fell like rain.

The man drew back his arm and glared into the flora directly over Mara's head.

"Come out," he growled, more snarl than English. "I know you are there."

Mara lay still, pressed her face to the dirt, and willed her heart to slow. She heard the crackle of her own aura but couldn't silence it, not on her own. She hoped it would blend in with the single vined tree that still burned, but the closer the alchemist got the more she expected her effort to fail.

Heavy footsteps, leaden as clay, advanced on her position. The earthquake returned, rattling her teeth, her ribs, her lungs.

Three steps away, he stopped. Mara peered up in time to see the man's head snap around, as though drawn by his nose to look back at the island -- no, towards the ocean. Tense as a hound on the hunt, he bolted. Heavy footsteps crashed through the trees to the rocky shore and kept going.

At last, Mara drew another breath. She turned one ear toward the ocean and, in her heightened state, caught a hint of distant killer whale song as it broke the surface and came back down. Qalu. Thank god. With the hunter stuck on land, she'd be sure to slip away unharmed.

But the alchemist would surely return soon, so Mara couldn't risk the chance she'd been given. In the next breath, she was on all fours, then on her feet and running for the bridge. She bolted across in record time, rushed for the safety of the island, and finally disappeared into its copse of trees.

#

When she finally reached Winter House, Mara found the front door locked. The curtains were drawn and the whole house stood silent, as though abandoned.

She spent ten minutes on the porch, knocking and calling. The pit in her gut grew deeper each time Alvis didn't respond. She peered through windows and paced the lawn for a glimpse of the second floor, all to no avail. There was not a peep, not a sound, not a shadow.

Mara raked fingers through her hair and pulled. This was all her fault. Alvis could be hurt, bleeding or unconscious or locked in a cage. That monster could have broken his legs, or poisoned him, or worse.

She returned to the door and this time her calls were answered. A high, bird-like voice drew her eyes down to where, half-in and half-out of an old mouse hole, she found Nephele.

The wee thing was covered in dust, especially her face, where it all turned muddy with tears. The nice white frock Caden had stitched her was stained and wrapped in a cobweb. Once she'd freed herself from the mouse hole, she sat on the porch and bawled until Mara swooped down to scoop her up.

"Shush, séek', shush," she soothed, using the hem of her sweater to clean the little doll up as best she could. "It's okay now. Dad...Daddy's here."

Her throat tightened. Had she even the right to call herself that anymore?

She cradled Nephele close the way Alvis always did, rocking her until she calmed. Nephele lay her ear to Mara's pulse-point and finally relaxed, her body going limp in Mara's palm.

"That's my girl," Mara whispered, lifting Nephele to a new perch on in the shoulder pocket of her coat. "Now, where's Alvis? Point the way."

Nephele wiped her eyes on her arm and pointed up, angling clearly to the second floor. Mara backed up for another look, but the windows remained empty. Her heart burned with fear.

With Nephele in hand, she rounded the house looking for another way in. There was no back door that she could see, only the wide windows of the lab, which had no curtains but showed that the lab was empty. The rock she tossed at one bounced back with the force of a gunshot, warning her against trying again.

It took a second lap before she finally found her entrance: an old basement window, half-hidden in weeds. Its frame was broken and its lock was on its last legs. A good hard kick with the heel of her boot, and she was in.

She slipped through, feet-first, and dropped into the darkness. Her boots hit concrete, rattling metal and glass somewhere in the black. Trapped moisture thickened the air, smelling of salt and sea-brine. The window, choked by a tarnish of dirt and age, allowed only the thinnest rays of weak sunlight through to illuminate the wall in gray.

Nephele whimpered, ducking deeper into the pocket. Mara stroked her head and pulled out her phone to use its light. The first thing illuminated was the dust, which hung thick as fog. After that came a shelf, one of two that she stood between, as tight-set as those in the library. These shelves were made of metal, and each held a dozen glass vessels covered in dust. Most looked like those in the lab, but a few were jars, and in the jars were specimens -- frogs and fetal pigs and tiny constructs like Nephele, all clearly dead and suspended in thick green preservative.

Mara shielded Nephele with her hand and carefully stepped from between the shelves. There were six of them, arranged in two neat rows which opened up into the basement proper. There, Mara found two cold metal operating tables stored side-by-side and a third that had been

wheeled directly under the bare bulb that would have illuminated the room. All three were rusted and the one nearest the wall looked blood-stained.

Past the third table lay the stairs, but as she reached the first step Mara gave into the temptation to stop and cast the light around, just once, to see what the rest of the room contained.

She regretted it almost immediately.

In addition to broken glassware and more shelves lining the walls with books, Mara's light fell onto two tall glass tubes that dominated the center of the room. Both stretched nearly to the ceiling, both were wide enough around to hold a grown man. One stood empty, its case broken and its glass covered in dust. The other, half-filled with green sludge, contained the bare ribs, spine, arms, and skull of an unfinished human skeleton. Perhaps it was made of copper, like Nephele. Perhaps not.

Mara didn't wait around to find out.

She emerged in the familiar wood-paneled hall, slamming the stair door behind her. She stopped a moment to catch her breath, then took Nephele from her pocket and lay her palm flat so the homunculus could stand. "All right. Where is he?"

Nephele bounded on her fingers like a spring board, alighting briefly on the frame of an old map before swinging up onto the banister to the second floor. She ran up it a few feet, then started to slide, only for Mara to cup a hand behind her and push her the rest of the way. Nephele giggled all the way to the second floor.

The second-floor hall was smaller than the first, but more crowded, with a half-a-dozen doors clustered in groups of three at opposite ends. A quick decision led Mara through the only open doors -- an oaken double set that stood slightly ajar -- and into the library, which resided on

a large balcony overlooking the "great room" below. Mara paid the room and its books little attention, too occupied by the thin, weak-looking single door that stood directly across the rug.

Nephele pointed at it, pulling Mara's sleeve and dangling from the button of her coat cuff. Mara hurried across and tried the tin knob. It was locked.

"Alvis!" She knocked. "Can you hear me? It's Mara."

She pressed her ear to the door, listening to the rustle of cloth on the other side. It took a long time, but when she rattled the knob for a third round Alvis finally answered. "Go away."

Mara frowned. She pushed at the door to test its strength and felt it give a little. Compared to the rest of the house, this door didn't seem too secure. It was almost like a closet.

"Alvis, can you unlock this door?"

"No."

"Then I'm coming in."

His next protest was lost as she backed up, tucking Nephele safely into the pocket of her coat before she charged.

Bang! The door jumped in its frame. She heard something crack, but it didn't give.

She tried again. Bang! This time she heard a distinct splinter. A crack appeared down the door frame and the door hung slightly loose. One more blow and it'd give way.

She backed up again, but this time the door was shifted back to its original position from the other side. "Stop," said Alvis through the cracks. "Just stop, Mara. Please."

Mara rolled her shoulder, which had started to ache from the strain, but knew she could take it. "I can't do that. I'm getting you out. Stand back."

Alvis made a sound that might have been more clothes rustling and might have been a sigh. The knob fidgeted a bit, then his feet retreated. "Fine."

Mara backed all the way to the opposite wall. She thought about what the bear-man had done with the trees and thought how she might do the same, perhaps turning her aura into a physical force. She breathed slow, like in meditation, but instead of dimming the flames she imagined them rising up to burn high and stronger.

This time, the charge worked. Maybe because of aura, or maybe because of the previous attacks. Whatever reason, the frame cracked and the door burst open.

In the same instant, thunder flung Mara backwards and half-way across the room.

#

Mara lay flat on her back, her arms splayed and her bones aching. All the air had been forced from her lungs and her ears rang like the Orthodox Church on a Sunday.

Her mind's eye replayed the moment of impact in slow motion, crystal clarity, and -- oddly -- an out-of-body perspective. She pictured her body hitting the door, heard glass crackle under the wood, and saw herself arch backwards ten feet to crash shoulders-first into the hardwood floor.

When the next blink bleared her vision, she found Alvis kneeling beside her. He peered down at her over his glasses, lips pursed and expression cool. Mara tried to speak, but only managed a wheezing intake of breath. Alvis said nothing. He propped her head up on a folded shirt, then reached for coat pocket to retrieve Nephele. The homunculus looked sad to be lifted away, but didn't fight her creator to stay.

Mara closed her eyes. When next she opened them, she could breathe again, and her hearing had fully returned. She sat up with a groan, cradling her sore shoulder. The bedroom door was once again closed. Its knob lay abandoned on the floor.

She dragged herself up and peered through the new hole in the door. It offered enough of a view to tell her that Alvis had pushed his dresser in front of the door as a barricade. Mara leaned against the wood, but Alvis cut her off from the other side before she could speak.

"I told you to go away."

His voice shook. He sounded so close. Mara pictured him sitting on the floor, his back to the dresser and his knees pulled in as though his hundred-pound weight could somehow add to the dresser's strength.

"I can't do that," she said, and coughed to clear the last wheeze from her throat. There were glass shards under her shoe. That explained the thunder – one of Alvis's tubes. "Are you okay?"

"You got me in trouble." Alvis sniffed. He had been crying. "I told you. He couldn't know that you'd been here. He was so angry with me." His attempt at a breath turned into a sob. Mara pictured him hiding his eyes with his hand. "He'll be even angrier when he sees what you've done to the door."

Mara lay her forehead against the wood, cursing herself and the entire situation under her breath. "I'm sorry, Alvis. I'm so sorry. I just--"

Wanted to talk to you, wanted to see you, wanted to hear your voice. I've been alone for three days and I can't stand it, and then I think of you and I worry. You've been alone for years.

She took a deep breath, cleared her tangled emotions, and started again. "I came here to help you. And bring news. Will you listen?"

No answer. Mara took that as license to go on.

"We found your dad."

A short gasp, muffled through teeth. The dresser creaked as Alvis straightened his back against it.

"He used to work at my school. That means you've probably been there too." Mara rolled from the door, propping her non-bruised shoulder against the library wall. "I called to tell you that. And to suggest...well, we were thinking..."

She swallowed to wet her dry throat. This conversation resembled coaxing a frightened dog. She'd made her approach, now if she timed the pounce she'd be able to catch him and calm him down. If she missed, he'd startle, and who knew if she'd be able to track him again.

"If you came to the school with us, you might remember something."

A snivel. "I'd get in more trouble."

"No, no you won't. There's a plan." Now or never. "Tomorrow night, there's a dance. People wear masks and bring guests from outside. If you come as my date, no one will know."

Silence. Mara half-wondered if Alvis even knew what "dating" meant. Would it scare him off if he did?

"Please, Alvis. We want to help you." Mara moved a bit too quick and twinged her bruised shoulder. She held it, clenched her jaw to muffle the wince, and kept going. "This could get you all the clues you need. If it doesn't work, or goes sour, then after this...after this, I'll leave you alone. You'll never see me again."

It would be enough. If only she could get him out of this house, get him safe and away from that monster of a man, then it wouldn't matter if he hated her. She wouldn't leave someone in this situation. Not a stranger. Definitely not her friend.

The silence between them stretched longer than any which came before. Finally, Alvis sighed. Mara heard the soft clamber of skin-on-wood that was him getting to his feet.

"I couldn't make you do that," he said, so soft she nearly missed it. "It'd make Nephele sad."

The next thing Mara heard was the scrape of wood against wood as he pushed the dresser back to its rightful place. Mara tamped down her urge to throw the door wide and instead stood back until Alvis opened it himself.

He stood in the door with Nephele perched on his flat, out-stretched palm. He wore bandages that he had not before, layers of gauze around his fingers and down his wrist to the cuffs of his shirt. His eyes were red too, and his cheeks shiny as though they'd recently been wiped clean.

Bursting with energy, Nephele jumped for Mara, who caught her with practiced ease. She barely noticed the little thing climbing her coat, because her eyes were locked on Alvis's new wounds. They made her heart ache.

"He hurt you."

Alvis pulled his hands in self-consciously. "No. I fell against the athanor by accident."

"Please don't lie to me."

"I'm not."

He could have stabbed her and it wouldn't have hurt this much. Alvis seemed to take notice and tried to make his smile a little less sad. "Any new clues on your monster?"

It sounded forced. Mara steadied Nephele's climb and shook her head. "Don't worry about that. We're focused on your dad right now."

Alvis's smile faded. He brought a hand to his mouth and chewed nervously on his bottom lip. "Mara...you guys shouldn't go to this much trouble for me."

"We want to. You're our friend."

"You don't know the first thing about me."

A flash of anger. A flare of hurt.

"I know you don't deserve to stay--" Locked up. In this house. With that monster. "--in the dark your whole life because that asshole thinks he owns you."

Alvis quirked his head, perhaps piecing together who 'that asshole' was. When it clicked, his sad smile returned. "But he does own me."

Mara's heart snapped like tinder. She closed the distance between them, pulled Alvis to her, and held on for dear life. If either of them trembled, the other said nothing.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Mara didn't want to leave him, not when that monster could return at any time. But she had no choice. She'd risked enough as it was, and the longer she strayed from Mount Vilna the more likely she'd be caught.

Alvis refused to go with her. He didn't say that he needed time alone, but Mara could read it in his eyes. She settled, for now, for wheedling out the promise that, if his master hadn't returned, he would come to Mount Vilna before sundown the next evening. If she pressed for more, he might not come at all. So Mara tried to be content.

She wasn't.

The school day was nearly over by the time she returned to the head of the trail. Mount Vilna stood dormant, breathless with anticipation for the coming eruption of class's end and the rush to savor a last few sunlit hours. Rejoining her classmates right after the bell would be Mara's best chance to pass unseen. It would be her one salvation, assuming that she hadn't already been missed.

At first, she kept to the tree line. Then, she risked a dash across open grass to the faculty parking lot. There, she moved in the shadows from mini-van to pick-up to beat-up old beamer, keeping one eye on the clock and the other on the Admin Building. The blinds of Faulkner's forward-facing wide window were sealed.

The bell rang as she reached the last car, tinny through ancient speakers better suited to air raids or storm watch. The doors opened soon after, delivering the first trickle of students. Mara waited until they'd built a bit of a crowd before she made for the gates. She was home free.

Or at least, she would have been, had Principal Faulkner not emerged from a side door in the Admin Building. Shit.

For the second time that day, Mara flung herself face down into the cover of a bush, though the hedges alongside the building were considerably better-trimmed. She squeezed into the space under her branches, cursed the wood chips under her palm, and prayed that she hadn't been seen.

She heard the door swing shut, followed by Faulkner's steady stride away from the building and across the walk. They appeared before her, polished black leather with an oxford shine. Their stride remained steady, walking straight past her en route to his fancy black truck. Then they stopped. Turned around. Wandered back.

Mara pressed herself flat until the wood chips bit into her skin. It was over. When Faulkner looked down, he would see her. She cursed her damned luck under her breath, able only to watch as his shoes closed in on her location --

-- right up until they leapt back from the edge with a yelp and an odd clattering sound.

Mara risked a glance up to see Faulkner fighting a wriggling plastic machine that might have been a beetle and might have been a dragon fly. Either way, it had crashed into Faulkner's head and was now doing its damndest to tangle every joint of its segmented legs into his hair.

"Whoops!" called a familiar voice. Syd's sneakers jogged up, the boy who wore them sounding completely at ease despite his next words. "Sorry there, sir. Little darling got away from me. We're still getting used to these strong coastal winds."

"Mis--argh! Mister Green!" Faulkner spat his words through clenched teeth as he tried and failed to untangle the bug from his hair. "You have...ten seconds...to get this thing off me!"

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir. It'll only take a second if you come over here."

Starched cloth huffed in protest before both sets of feet turned for the parking lot. Mara stayed down until she couldn't hear their steps anymore, then continued to stay down because more steps were coming right for her.

A pair of off-brand sneakers -- just like the ones she owned, but never wore -- came to a stop beside to her. "Coast's clear," said Caden.

Mara sighed in relief and shimmied out from under the hedge. She brushed herself off, dislodging the wood chips but not the rips or the grass stains or the cuts on her hands, still bloody from thorns.

Caden frowned, once more showing his father's wrinkles. "You look like hell." He rubbed at a grass stain and nudged the bruise on her rib, drawing a wince. "What happened?"

Mara almost said, "Long story," but of course Caden would never let her leave it at that. What came out instead was, "I fucked up."

Caden took her gingerly by the arm and lead her back to campus, through students that crossed the lawn to avoid her and down to the first bench over-looking the campus green. Once

they'd settled, Mara's story poured out: everything from calling Alvis to facing the bear-man to talking desperately through a door, hoping she'd be heard.

By the time she'd finished, Caden had his arm around her. He didn't need to speak. She didn't need it, not with worry and shame threatening to burn her from the inside. Telling the story made it officially over. Once it was all out, she could move on.

"...so of course Faulkner'd be around the second I get back." Mara raked fingers through her sweat-soaked hair. She'd been inches from going home, and only now did she realize how foolish that fear had been. "That would've figured. Get caught at the last minute. Ruin the whole thing. I owe you. You saved me."

"I didn't," said Caden with a shrug. "It was Syd."

His phone chimed in his pocket for the third time since they'd sat down. He only checked it now that she'd finished speaking. The quiet gave Mara a chance to exhale the last lingering smoke of her story and feel the relief that rushed into its place. She was safe now. The risk was over, she was not going home, and in twenty-four hours Alvis would be safely away from that island. Her plan was a good one. She could count on Petrov. Everything would be fine.

She looked to Caden, who peered intently at his phone while his fingers danced through a return text. Syd's face briefly filled the screen after it'd been sent.

"He okay?" she asked.

"He's fine. Waiting for us in the dorm commons. He's not in trouble either, through Faulkner did confiscate Abena."

Mara raised an eyebrow. She'd never heard anyone but Syd call his creations by name. "Abena?"

"Yes. She's meant to fly, for real." Caden tucked his phone away and kept his hands in his pockets, leaning back and stretching his legs like they ached. "He wanted to show me, away from the trees. Hence, parking lot."

"... You two aren't going to this dance as friends, are you?"

Caden's cheeks went orchid-dark, which was all the confirmation she needed. Mara had been half-expecting this all day, but it got pushed aside in light of everything else. Now, she wondered how she could have missed it. Caen was her best friend. How wrapped up in herself had she been not to see this coming?

"When did it happen?" It was really the only question she had that he could answer. "I mean, when did you..."

"Saturday." Caden kept his head tipped back, those earth-brown eyes still watching the sky. "After sickbay. When I returned to the dorm." He smiled at a passing cloud. It was not a smile the cloud deserved. "Syd was worried, I guess. About me. Kept me up babbling, then he kissed me. And... I liked it."

"I should hope so!"

Caden sat up. His pockets twisted as his hands tried to wring themselves through the fabric. "Mara, y'know how... I mean, this doesn't change... you and I aren't..."

"Breathe, ax já." Mara placed her hand on the writhing cloth, bringing it to a stop. "I'm happy for you. Really."

Caden leaned into her, head on her shoulder like when they were kids. His aura sang like wind through a cave, but even without it, they were back at a place where they needed no words.

#####

Mara returned to her room before dinner, forgoing another meal of whispers and glares in favor of a long shower. When she emerged, she found Silena, as usual, already settled among her many pillows and stitching a length of gray cloth with invisible thread.

"What's that?" Mara asked, digging into her stash of care-package treats. A week ago she would have ignored her roommate. A week ago she wouldn't have cared. Funny how much seven days could change.

Silena didn't answer at first as she held the thread between her teeth to keep it taut. She worked out her tricky stitch with a few quick loops and bit off the excess before spitting it out. "It's my costume for tomorrow." She shook out the cloth, revealing a loose cape with a hood. "Wouldn't bother, but Courtney wanted the Fates and they need three so..."

Mara stared at her, forgetting the strip of salmon jerky hanging half-in and half-out of her mouth. Her mind had gone blank. She could have sworn she heard a dial tone.

Silena scowled, tugging the hair-curtain farther over her scars. "What? Whatever you think, I'm not a--"

"No, no." Mara shook her herself, restarting her brain enough to recall that she no longer wished to antagonize Silena. "It's not you. Swear."

"Then what?"

Mara shoved the jerky into her mouth to avoid answering. She wheeled around to toss open her closet door. Such a stupid, minor thing to forget, but of course it slipped her mind.

"Didn't get a costume, huh?" Silena didn't vocalize the implicit "you're screwed," but Mara heard it anyway. "I thought you didn't care. Didn't dress up last year."

Last year, Mara volunteered to paint faces at the clan meeting house in-town specifically to avoid the otherwise mandatory school events. She'd never understood Halloween, not like they did it here. In Keijin, it'd been a night for ghost stories and sweets and staying up with bad movies. Things were different here. Latea wasn't a large city, but it was large enough for Halloween.

"So...what?" Silena continued, still puzzling over her roommate's behavior. "You're going to the dance? That's no reason to freak. Unless..."

Mara pawed through her closet, looking for something she could make a costume from in less than twenty-four hours. She heard Silena rise from her bed, mattress creaking. She didn't turn around, not even when the taller girl stood so close that her hair brushed Mara's shoulder.

"You have a date."

Mara grit her teeth and pawed through the winter clothes she hadn't unpacked.

Silena laughed. "About time! Thought Caden would drop dead trailing after you."

"Caden's not into me."

Silena raised her eyebrow. Mara saw it reflected in the mirror on her closet door. "Is that right."

"It is."

"You're *sure*?"

Mara pictured Syd, especially the way he'd been all over Caden while they played cards in the common. It'd been subtle touches, sure -- a shoulder nudge here, brushing fingers there, at one point even messing with Caden's hair. Yet Caden hadn't pulled away, which was more than he allowed anyone before.

Mara smirked. "I'm sure."

Silena drummed her fingers against the closet door. "Then who is it?"

"You wouldn't know him."

"A townie!"

"Stop."

Silena, to her credit, did just that. Hands raised in surrender, she returned to her bed and her sewing, leaving Mara to drag out an armful of old clothes, which she dumped on her bed.

Mara didn't fully know why the questions put her on edge. Sure, it was a bit bizarre to know that Silena -- quiet, sullen and studious Silena -- was also a gossip, but dating rumors were no worse than everything else she'd heard lately. Maybe it was just that she knew Alvis wouldn't think of the night that way, so it felt wrong to let the assumption stand. She wasn't doing this for a party. She was doing it to help her friend.

She dragged her desk chair over and started sorting through the pile of sweaters, winter shirts, old scarves, and long underwear. Eventually, she worked up another nerve and said to Silena, "You know how you offered help if I need it?"

"Yeah?" Despite her earlier claim of disinterest, the rise in her voice betrayed curiosity about the strangeness surrounding Mara.

"I might need into the library. About an hour after the dance starts." She read the protest in Silena's face and cut the concern off short. "It's not for a prank."

Silena's objection turned to disgust. "You aren't having sex..."

"Ugh, *no*." Mara lobbed a sweater at her roommate's head. Whatever she felt about Alvis, that was out of the question. "Could you just trust me for once? It'll be in and out. Fifteen minutes, tops."

"Fine." Silena lobed the sweater back into the pile. "I'll leave the side door open, the one that leads outside."

PART FOUR



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The autumn sun set early, growing heavy and dark as it dipped into ocean gray. The sky, for once clear, bled orange and red around wooded island peaks and the first distant mountain-caps of snow.

Alvis watched it all from his little dock, turned for once away from the city and towards the Latea Sound. He scanned the waves, spotting the occasional diving tern or surfacing seal, but only a few humans now that the fishers had come in for the night. He wondered where Qalu was, whether she'd swam out to sea in the nice weather or chose to stay in her Rock with her toys.

Seeing her again would be nice, but she had her own life.

He wrung the strap of his messenger bag, stuffed once again with the tools of his trade. He wished he could use them to bottle the sun's fire and plant it in his chest. Maybe then his courage would burn, like Mara's, instead of dissolving into sludge.

He might have stood there until nightfall, if not for tiny hands yanking his too-long hair. Nephele giggled, so pleased to have gotten his attention. She swung from the strands and kicked hard enough to bruise his shoulder before dropping into her usual pocket to giggle and roll.

Despite himself, Alvis chuckled too. "Okay, okay. Ready to go?"

She chirped her affirmation, sliding down the strap and perching on his bag to watch the world around them go by. Alvis resettled things so she could lean on his hip and set off for the bridge before his resolve could falter. Behind them, Winter House stood empty. Over twenty-four hours and still Darius had sent no word. Alvis worried -- to leave without explanation was bizarre -- yet he also felt relief. No teacher meant no anger, at least for the time being. He could still find a way to fix what he'd done.

The bridge loomed before him, all salt-soaked wood and creaking joints. He'd only crossed it once before, the day he met Mara, and back then he couldn't bring himself to set foot on dry ground. Today, he crossed half-way before the fear caught him. The trees stood wide open. His master's truck sat untouched. Only space and his own nerves stood between him and the outside world.

A cold breeze blew in, chilling him. He shivered and pulled the lab coat tight. His fingers found the ring at his neck; they clutched, letting the familiar weight ground him in the here and now.

Nephele peered up at him, her face drawn to a point of concern. She tugged at his coat and pointed. Her eyes said, "Keep going. I want to see."

Alvis pat her head absently, studying the bag with the other hand and feeling the logbooks within. He thought of his father, of knowledge and the lost journal and that one distant

memory of a voice through the sea. This trip would be Alvis's only chance to find him. He had to know, and so he couldn't stay.

With a final deep breath, Alvis stepped from the bridge and turned right on the path towards town.

#

True to Mara's word, the trail on the right ran straight, if winding. Once he'd left the bridge and the car road behind, Alvis found neither branches nor gaps in the path, only serpentine curves and earth worn flat.

The long walk gave him time to think, while Nephele distracted herself; she swung on his sleeves and climbed up his buttons, taking in every new plant they passed and straining to catch the last falling leaves. Alvis kept one eye on her and one on the orb of green fire he used to light their way, thinking back to all the people he'd watched from his island over the years. Many kayakers and canoeists had been teens. He wondered if any would be at the school. If they were, would he recognize them? Would he want to?

His fear lingered like stagnant rain, but twilight peace made it easier to ignore. As night truly fell, the trail ahead caught the first wisps of artificial orange light. Alvis sped up, tucking the first orb back in his bag and collecting Nephele from his lapel. She tried to bribe him with puppy dog eyes and a newly-caught leaf, but he only kissed her cheek and returned her to the bag.

He jogged past the tree line and immediately slipped when packed dirt turned to slick green grass. He caught himself with a quick hop, turned to shake the grass from his coat, and looked for the first time upon Mount Vilna High.

Mara never spoke of the place much, neither had the boys. It left Alvis not entirely knowing what to expect from this place where his friends spent most of their time. Now, seeing the main buildings in their matching brown brick, one bearing a watch tower and the other a sign, he still didn't know what to think. It didn't seem entirely uninviting, but the iron gate between the two and the matching fence that ran straight to the shore made him uneasy.

And then, there was the people. Oh the people! Between Alvis and the school lay a broad pavement plain slowly filling with new and old cars. From these cars emerged dozens of people, nearly all of whom resembled him in height and age. A few wore plain skirts or jeans. All the rest were decked out in the most bizarre clothes he'd ever seen -- silver cloth and fish bowls, fake bodies full of air, tiny skirts with fake tails and, of course, the masks. So many masks.

Alvis pulled his lab coat close and kept his head down, trailing the clusters of people through the gates (in which orange paper was tangled) and onto cement paths through the school grounds.

They were not as crowded as he had feared, though the dozens became hundreds as the school population appeared in costumes of their own. Guided by lampposts and occasional bored-looking adult, the teens moved from parking lot and two buildings to the east towards the towering gray cube that sat right at the tip of Metharme Island.

Alvis broke from the crowd before he got there, ducking into a building's shadow and searching passing faces for his friends. No luck. Nephele kicked at his leg through the bag. Alvis

opened her pocket's "window" so she could see the crowd and turned his own attention back to examine the school from within.

From this direction, lit only by lamps and the last distant glimpse of setting sun, the whole location seemed less academic. Older, he thought. More military.

Once, while reading, he'd come across the French term Déjà visité -- the uncanny sense that a location never before visited is familiar. That feeling rippled through him now. He knew this place.

Someone grabbed him from behind. With one hand on his knapsack and the other fisting his coat, the attacker swung him around while cackling and tossed him into the nearest wall.

His shoulders hit brick hard enough to bounce. Alvis reached for his bag, only to find his shoulders already pinned. A stark white face and jagged scar-smile flooded his field of vision. Cold metal pressed to the skin of his throat. "Whattya say, kid?" cackled the monster. "Give me a smile?"

The attacker loomed menacingly in the dark, pressing the blade deeper... only to break away with a braying laugh and smack his rag-clothed knee.

With distance, Alvis could see that it -- he -- wasn't a monster at all. He wasn't even a homunculus. He was a boy, wrapped in tattered old clothes with cedar-brown skin poking out at the collar and sleeves. He held a small knife, but it was a prop, and his white make-up had smeared onto Alvis's shirt.

"Oh man!" he managed between hoots. "You should see your face! I got you so good, kid."

He ran off after that, perhaps expecting retribution for the scare. Alvis couldn't even consider it. In truth, he could hardly think. He stayed pressed against the wall, lungs heaving and throat burning. The world around him faded away.

Hands on his throat and claws in his spine, sharp as pens, dull as screw drivers, digging, digging. The wall tilted behind him and he fell, thrashing, the weight and the hands and the claws coming with him as he fell.

Weight, weight on his chest, crushing his lungs. Hands, hands on his throat, crushing his neck.

He couldn't breath. He couldn't breath.

Oh god.

He was going to--

"All right there, love?"

Alvis gasped like he'd come up for air and immediately clapped his hands to his mouth. Tears sprang to his eyes before he could stop them. His shoulders heaved.

A woman stood with him, dressed as a nun. She was older, his master's age at least, with a face full of wrinkles now pinched with kind concern. A gentle hand hovered over his arm without touching.

"You're shaking." In the darkness, she had to squint her already-folded eyes to see Alvis at all. "If you're sick, we can lie you down in the infirmary."

"No." Alvis jerked from the wall before she could touch him, pulling at his coat like that could protect him from this. "No...thank you, ma'am. I'm fine."

A lie. He couldn't shake the feeling of hands on his throat, of crushing darkness and no breath. But staying here was the opposite of help. He had to get away. Now.

He staggered from the kind woman until his feet hit cement. More stable here, he straightened his back and his coat and fast-walked for the school gates. Nephele kicked at his leg to protest, but he ignored her. This place was not good. Not safe.

A hand on his shoulder pulled at his coat. Alvis spun around with a cry.

"Woah!" Caden tossed up his hands and took a step back. "Calm down. It's me."

Alvis had his fist raised, as though he knew how to throw a punch. He didn't. It shook as he brought it down, but the presence of a familiar face -- and that godsend of a rock-steady aura - - calmed him down. "Sorry."

"It's fine. Are you?"

"I shouldn't be here."

That, of all things, made Caden laugh. Not mean or loud, just soft. Understanding. "I hear you. I felt the same."

Alvis kept his hands together until they stopped shaking. Caden couldn't know everything, but he could believe -- just for a moment -- that he understood some.

"C'mon," Caden said, gesturing towards one building with a flip of the wrist. "Mara's waiting. She'll make you feel better."

This time, he was almost definitely correct.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"So, can I ask?"

Syd's question pulled Mara from her thoughts back into the too-small, too-empty gray classroom. With the school so crowded, it'd been hard to find a private meeting place near the gym but away from the mob. They'd finally settled on Ms. Applegate's art studio, which she always left unlocked for those who wanted to work outside of class.

Tucked into an ignored corner of the Auxiliary Building with a clear view of the gym across the lawn, it seemed perfect. Yet, Syd seemed out-of-place. He side-stepped half-dry paintings and piles of sawdust, regarding most finished pieces with confusion and a weird, twisted face. He seemed to be dressed as someone from Star Wars -- not that Mara knew or cared who -- and fiddled constantly with both his robes and the light-saber at his belt even as he broke the awkward silence between them.

Mara, who leaned against a nearby workbench with one eye on the door, raised an eyebrow. "Ask what?"

"Nothing important." Syd flicked the ring at the edge of his metal hilt, which spun.

"Guess I just wondered..."

"Spit it out."

"...What are you?"

Mara caught a flare of indignation before she remembered that she, too, wore a costume. Or at least something like it. The raid of her closet last night had produced a black winter dress, form-hugging and knee-length with long sleeves and a high collar. Under it, she wore leggings to match. Over it, she'd layered a drapery green top that hung off one shoulder and a makeshift mini-sarong of old shirts that almost matched her hair. Green laces in black shoes and green face-paint across her eyes completed the look.

It was not her best work. Her cheeks heated and she avoided Syd's eye. "I'm the gis'óok."

"In what now?"

She rolled her shoulders and ruffled the green like a curtain. "The northern lights."

"Ooooh." Syd quirked his head towards one shoulder, the same way he'd regarded Chena Madison's Dali homage before. "Yeah, I guess I can see it."

Mara folded her arms under the drape, feeling self-conscious. Syd didn't linger, glancing instead to the large clock at the back of the room. "Been about ten minutes. Where are our boys?"

Around sunset, the two of them and Caden had split up to find Alvis, each agreeing to take one part of the school and meet back up in the studio. Mara took her phone from the pocket she'd stitched in the sarong and checked that the wall clock was accurate. It was. Ten minutes late and Caden was nowhere to be found. She hoped that was a good sign.

"We could go looking again."

"Nah." Syd flicked the ring again, letting it rattle. "They'll be along. 'Sides, this could be a good chance to, y'know. Talk."

He lingered on that last word. Mara guess that this wouldn't be about the dance.

"Cay told you, right? About him and me?" Syd spun the ring again and again, his thumb keeping it going in constant motion. The other hand gripped his belt in search of occupation. His aura rustled like the herald winds of a coming storm. "I need to know we're still cool. You and me, him and you."

Mara eased off the wall, slipping almost "at-ease" to soothe the agitation she did not share. There must be history to his words. A history that had nothing to do with her. "We're fine."

Syd's lips smushed into something between a frown and a pout. He didn't believe her.

"For real, Syd." Mara pushed herself to smile wider than she normally would. Her father always said that if you wanted the dleit káa to see your true feelings, you had to exaggerate them. Syd was not dleit káa, of course, but she figured that t'ooch' káa from the Outside probably worked the same way. "We're cool. We'll only have a problem if you hurt him." Though sure she'd look ridiculous in the dress and drapes, she tossed back the sleeves to give her knuckles and threatening crack. "Break up and I break your nose. Yeah?"

She was only half joking, but that was enough to return Syd's soft breeze and bright smile. Behind him, the classroom door swung open. Caden entered, dressed to match his roommate, with Alvis in tow.

"Found him."

"Perfect timing." Syd sent Mara a wink and swept forward to meet his date. He caught Caden's arm in one hand and his belt in the other, pulling him in to steal a quick kiss. Caden gave a startled "Eep!" but did not pull away. His pale cheeks darkened with blush.

It lasted only a few seconds, so Mara didn't have to avert her eyes. Syd came out of it grinning like a drunk moose and turned to Alvis, who looked like he'd been slapped. "Good to see you, man. Looks like you've got some last-minute prep to do."

"I--"

"We'll go on ahead then. Right, babe?"

Caden got even darker. Mara guessed that embarrassment had turned his throat to stone. He punched Syd in the beefy upper arm but made no move to extract the hand from his waist.

Syd laughed off the punch and, with some last cheery goodbyes, pulled his date out into the hall. If that's what the pair acted like with a private audience, Mara hated to think how they might handle living together. Maybe she should invest in a sleeping bag in case Caden ever needed a night to himself on the floor of her dorm.

When she settled on Alvis, her heart swelled to see him again, safe and sound with no indication that the bear had returned to Canon Rock. If anything, he looked exactly the same as ever: old clothes, tattered knapsack, dramatic black coat and all.

He worried the ring on his leather cord, but didn't quite get it into his mouth. "Prep work?"

Mara tucked the phone back into her sarong and pulled out the only other thing she had there save the key to her dorm. "This."

"This," was a cloth mask cut from an old black scarf. Given Alvis's usual attire, she'd figured it would look enough like a costume that people wouldn't question. "Masks are traditional, for Halloween."

Alvis looked uncertain, but didn't object as she sat him on a stool and took the glasses off his face so she could tie on the mask. Their auras mixed together, waves against flame, and Mara allowed herself a content sigh. It felt good in her ears.

Alvis relaxed too, but half his attention remained on the door. "Were those two like that last time?"

"Not exactly. Is that a problem?"

"No. It's just..." Pink spread from his cheeks down the edge of his neck. "I've never seen anyone kiss before."

Mara paused in the middle of smoothing the mask. It occurred to her that if he'd never seen kissing, it must mean he'd never kissed anyone before either. She had the strangest urge to show him what he'd been missing.

Thankfully, that urge got chased off by Nephele, who called up with a high trill and pushed against the pocket of Alvis's bag. Alvis muttered to her in Russian and opened the bag, allowing her to clamber out. Nephele swung onto the top of the bag and sat there, staring up at Mara in awe of her colors and drapes.

Mara mussed the construct's hair and finished tying the mask over Alvis's eyes, returning his glasses so he could settle them back where they belonged.

"You're shaking," she noted, catching his hand in an attempt to stop it. His fingers curled against her palm, but he did not pull away.

"I'm fine. Just on-edge."

She waited. When that wasn't enough, he sighed.

"Some guy outside startled me. I got scared."

"What guy?"

"Student, I think. Painted white. Had a big scar painted on like--" Alvis freed his hands and motioned to his face, sliding fingers from his lips to his ears.

Mara rolled her eyes. "Danny Goto." She'd seen him earlier, slathering himself in blue-white paint and going on about Mahaha, Inuit folk monsters who freeze people to death in the snow. Naturally, his interpretation looked less like a monster of winter and more like a cheap knock-off comic book villain. "He's a jerk. I'll get him back later."

"Oh, no. You shouldn't." Alvis's face fell further, which made Mara cringe. "It wasn't all his fault. I think I remembered something but...it's bad."

Nephele hopped up to catch his hand, trying to hold it the way Mara had and bumping her head against his palm. Mara gave in to her new urge and hugged Alvis from behind, resting her head on his shoulder.

"You're safe now," she said, and it warmed her heart to know it was true. At least he was here, at least he was free, and he'd never go back to that island if she had any say.

#####

The Mount Vilna gym wasn't pretty, even at the best of times. A few coats of paint and a polished hardwood floor couldn't hide its airplane hangar past. But Mara had to admit: dim the lights and add some special effects and it made a hell of a venue for Halloween.

Even the outside looked cool, bearing only a few simple banners and otherwise letting the squat building speak for itself in ominous night. Smoke machine fog poured through the double-doors and onto the sidewalk, carrying the street lamps' light into a white plume that curled lazily through the grass.

Two senior-year teachers waited right outside the doors, stopping each student as they entered to sign in and confirm the identities of any visitors. Mara produced a note that claimed Alvis as a home-school student from in-town and, as they'd thought, the teachers didn't give its forged signature a second look.

Inside the gym, the lights shimmered at nearly nothing, leaving the hall in near-total darkness with strategically-placed black lights and decorations to guide the way. White smoke covered the floor, soaking the ends of misplaced streamers and dropping the overall temperature a few damp, chilly degrees. Up on the stage some local band with a drum that read "Misery Alaska" shredded through cheesy rock riffs in even cheesier zombie make-up.

Students and guests crowded the floor, so Mara and Alvis kept to the sides, moving along folded bleachers and around the other wall flowers until they found room to breathe. It took a while, as the crowd kept spilling over into the sidelines and Alvis froze up whenever anyone got too close. They were half-way across the gym when he finally stopped, bracing himself against the wall and struggling to catch his breath.

Mara turned back. Alvis stared at her. The black light made his pale eyes stand out, ever so slightly ghost-blue through his mask's frame.

"You look amazing," he whispered.

Under the black lights, Mara's half-assed costume transformed in ways she hadn't imagined it would. The drape and sarong glowed brilliant green while the dress nearly vanished

into the shadows. There were no mirrors, but she guessed that the paint around her eyes and the streak in her hair glowed too. Here, her abstract aurora became real.

It got attention from the crowd too, and those who looked over didn't immediately react with disgust at her presence. Mara didn't know if that came from fading rumors or because they couldn't see who she was in the dark. Either way, she was glad for the change, though she could do without the attention.

She caught the familiar, embarrassed duck of Alvis's head and twisted her wrist to catch his hand before he could pull away. "Thanks," she said, voice pitched so only he could hear. "Let's get a drink."

The punch smoked too, when they reached it, a block of dry ice belching clouds over the buffet and adding a hint of chill to the other foods. Alvis looked bewildered by it, but didn't reject a glass when Mara pressed it into his hands.

"There's so many people here," he said instead, scanning the dance floor. "You're around all this? All the time?"

Mara shrugged, downing her punch in a single swig and turning for the food. Among store-bought bat cookies and bowls of wrapped candy stood a few traditional foods of the season, something that MVH always tried to include at its events. Mara snagged a plateful of moose sausage meatballs and popped two into her mouth at once. "Ignore them if they bother you. That's what I do."

"You shouldn't. They all look to you."

"Look to avoid me," Mara corrected, though she had to admit that there was less of that happening here and now. They'd have to see if the relief continued tomorrow and in the light.

Out on the dance floor, Danny Goto in his stupid costume was shouting up at the band for some song that Mara'd never heard of. The band did switch, but apparently not to what Danny wanted, as he groaned dramatically and stumbled back until he crashed into a cluster of senior girls. The girls pushed him away like the toad he was, but the rest of the crowd didn't notice. The new song was high-energy. People were starting to mosh.

Mara scanned the crowd for Petrov -- no luck -- and rolled the toothpick for a single meatball between her thumb and forefinger. She held it out to Alvis. "Here."

He reached for it. She pulled back.

"Uh-uh. Open up."

Before he could, a flash of bright color caught their attention. Nephele, the clever thing, had worked the latch on her pocket loose enough to slip out and leap from Alvis's saddle-bag to the table. She might have been lost in the fog, if not for the black light turning her dress a brilliant lilac.

Alvis snatched her before she got too far, wrestling her back into the pocket despite her complaints and attempts to climb over his fingers. Mara used her body as a barrier between him and the rest of the room, though most were too wrapped up in the next song change to notice and even those who swung by the snack table weren't looking their way.

Nephele cried crocodile tears, squirming in her creator's hands and kicking the pocket's walls. She only stopped when Mara offered her a blueberry off the table, which was the size of the doll's head and full of juice, much to Nephele's delight. It seemed to placate her at least long enough for Mara to tuck her in with a napkin while Alvis re-latched her pocket.

Crisis averted, Mara polished off all but one of the moose balls and, again, held the final one to Alvis. "Your turn."

He looked uncertain, but parted his lips enough that she would place the treat between them. Mara let her finger linger against him, amused by his startled expression at the unfamiliar mix of spice and meat. Beneath that, he seemed tired. Overstimulated. She knew the feeling.

"See that fire exit over there?"

Alvis looked, but didn't see. Mara steered him away from the snacks and towards the rear of the gym, where she knew the fire doors were waiting.

"Over there. That's our out. Says it's alarmed, but it isn't. Fake."

Alvis squinted through the crowd. "There's a teacher there."

And so there was, propped against the wall by the fire exit doors to prevent exactly what Mara intended. Mara had expected that and been prepared to run a diversion, but -- what luck -- the teacher there was Petrov.

"It'll be fine." She took Alvis's hand again. "Follow me."

They slipped around the crowd and closed on Petrov from the left. He seemed distracted, staring out at the dance floor as though he were looking at something else, something behind the dancing students or perhaps lost in the fog. His hand lingered at the walkie-talkie on his belt, twisting the volume knob up and down. Up and down.

When he finally saw them, he jumped a foot. "Oh -- Mara."

Mara increased her grip on Alvis's hand. "Hey, Mr. Petrov."

The teacher cleared his throat, looking more on-edge than she'd ever imagined from him. "I'm sorry. It's no good to talk tonight. If you need something, I'm sure one of the other teachers could--"

"You remember that friend I mentioned before?"

Petrov stopped talking. His sudden stillness made the answer clear.

"This is him." Mara pulled Alvis in front of her and pushed at the small of his back to nudge him towards Petrov. Alvis stumbled. Mara heard his aura crackle like fresh ice spreading across the sea.

"I see," said Petrov. He cleared his throat again, as though that were the gear shift on his train of thought. He stepped away from the fire exit and seemed to settle from chaperone to counselor as he adjusted the glasses on his nose. "Forgive me. Mara's told me quite a bit about you, son."

Alvis's heels squeaked against the floor, probably leaving streaks on the wood. He twisted to look at Mara, bewildered, and in the process his mask came untied. It pulled loose, catching on his glasses. Alvis yanked it away and stared up at Petrov like a deer in a gun sight.

Even in the black light, Mara saw how the color drained from Petrov's face in an instant.

"Alvis?" he whispered.

Mara's breath snuffed out like a candle flame.

The radio at Petrov's hip crackled to life, releasing a stream of garbled hissing and static pops. Petrov's hand went for it, muffling the broken voice that fought through. A resounding thump echoed through the gym. Someone on the dance floor screamed.

"Danny! Danny, oh my god."

The dance floor parted like the red sea, revealing Danny Goto sprawled on the ground. When Mara realized what was going on, she nearly slapped her head -- the idiot had clambered up on stage with the band and tried to dive into the crowd, but no one caught him. He'd probably knocked himself silly.

Petrov slipped into full teacher mode, managing a quick, "Stay here," to Mara and Alvis before he went running to the rescue. The moment he was gone, Mara grabbed Alvis's hand and dragged him through the fire escape door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Outside, the temperature had dropped from chilly to near-freezing. It seemed shockingly quiet compared to the gym, even as the mild chaos from the dance floor's accident began to spill out onto the sidewalk beyond.

Alvis stumbled after Mara, pulled along until he managed to get his feet back under him. He jogged to come up alongside her. His bag thumped against his hip and the cloth mask slipped from his hand, forgotten. Mara's grip on his wrist stayed strong.

"Mara," he panted once he'd caught up. "What the hell is going on?"

"Don't know."

Well. That was clearly a half-lie. She'd had something planned, presenting him to that teacher, but now that plan seemed abandoned. She kept her eyes on the thin path beneath their feet and refused to look at Alvis. He wondered if that meant she was ashamed.

"You know Petrov?" she asked between measured jogging breaths.

"No. Never seen him before."

"You're sure?"

Alvis wasn't quite. He wanted to be mad because she'd tricked him, or tried to, but something nagged. It wasn't a voice or a memory, exactly. A smell. That man's scent, like fresh coffee and silver nitrate. That scent, of all things, he knew.

He shook his head. Those memories, from so long ago, were not his own. "I'm sure."

#

Mara led him around back of what Alvis took to be the school's main building, across a patch of land that held only a thin single-person sidewalk and a strip of grass before a short cement wall announced the land's end and dropped straight down into the harbor. This side of the building was mostly empty, save for a series of windows and -- on one bit that jutted out and seemed made from completely different material -- a single door with a small window in its upper half, which the path led straight to.

Mara tugged the door like she half-expected to find it locked, though it opened easily. She held it open for Alvis and he -- having nowhere else to go -- stepped inside.

The room beyond was dark at first, but he'd gone barely three steps before half the lights came on by themselves. Alvis found himself surrounded by tall, gorgeous redwood shelves and what must be thousands of books, reaching halfway up the high ceiling with its army of buzzing electric lights. Portraits hung on the walls between shelves and, through the gaps in furniture, he caught glimpses of distant tables and chairs waiting to be occupied.

Clearly, this was a library, at least four times the size of the one in his home. So much contained knowledge made his head spin. Imagine all he could learn!

While his brain lingered in its daze, his feet moved on their own. They carried him past the shelves and into an open area full of tables and wooden chairs. These, he guessed, must be for study and work, though they bore neither equipment nor glassware. That felt wrong.

No, wait...the whole thing felt wrong. Alvis frowned, trying to pin down his own reasoning. There should have been more shelves here, and the room had once been darker, smaller. More like a maze.

Mara had drifted back to give him space, but now she approached him from behind. Away from the dark light of the gym, her clothes had returned to their original mess of mismatched green and abstract thought. The magic was gone. Alvis missed it, even if it had been an accident.

"Remember anything?"

Alvis cleared his thoughts with a shake. Knowing was not quite the same as remembering, and he couldn't even be sure of where the thought had come from. Déjà visité. "Am I supposed to?"

Mara shrugged. The move made her green layers ripple as though in a warm breeze. She crooked a finger at him. "Over here."

She led him to the rear of the study area, in which a small secondary room had been built with more windows than walls. It contained more shelves, though these mostly carried plastic binders, and a row of framed portraits alongside the back wall. Including...

Alvis dripped over his own feet, knocking down folders as he caught himself on the shelf. His father stared back at him with judgmental eyes, smiling like the blade of a knife.

Alvis had never seen that smile before. In his entire house, there were no photos, no records, not even a sketch of his father's face. Yet, deep in his gut, he knew without even looking at the nameplate that this portrait belonged to that man.

"Easy," Mara warned, taking Alvis by the elbow and settling him back on his feet. For once, he genuinely needed the help. Seeing his father, even in effigy, stirred something in him that Alvis didn't like. It felt as though a whirlpool had opened where his heart should be and was steadily draining his Quintessence, leaving him light-headed and weak at the joints.

He knew this place. Knew this moment. Knew this man. His father.

Past the archive glass and the study area, the double doors that guarded the library proper started to rattle.

"Shit," Mara muttered, half-turning on the spot. "We should hide."

Alvis's feet moved on their own, responding to the half-memory stirred by father's image. Nephele thumped the bag against his leg, responding to the change in his aura and trying to get his attention. He ignored her. He drifted past his father's portrait to a row of shelves that stood against the archive's farthest wall. No...they were built in to the wall. They always had been.

"What are you doing?"

Alvis didn't know, so he didn't even bother trying to respond to Mara's frantic whisper. He was too caught up in the current of memory.

Standing before the second of three bookshelves, Alvis pushed through the stacks of folders and records until he'd cleared a space on the middle shelf for his fingers to search the wood directly. There, he found a circular indent in the wood. Not a knothole. A carving. One that held a very familiar shape.

Without knowing why, Alvis turned his hand and tried to press his knuckles into the hole. Nothing happened. The library door rattled again as whoever wanted to enter fumbled with the keys. Mara reached for his arm. "Alvis, we need to go."

Alvis dodged her, shaking enough of his memory loose to connect present with past. He lifted the ring from around his neck, pulled the cord off over his head, and pressed the face of the jewelry into the hole.

It slipped in perfectly. The shelf gave a soft click. A section of it slid down, and something in the wall rattled.

Alvis took a step back and pulled. The shelf moved with him, opening easily like a door on a hinge.

Beyond it, instead of the blank green walls that covered the rest of the room, there lay a stairwell, maybe eight by eight foot and black as a mineshaft. A flight of iron stairs, heavy with rust, led straight down until they hit the opposite wall, where they quirked into a second flight and disappeared into the shadows.

Mara swore again, this time in that mix of flame-whispers and wind that Alvis took to be her native tongue. Her aura flickered with indecision, only to blow past in an instant as the double-doors at the library entrance began to open. She tugged on Alvis's coat at the shoulder. "Come on."

Alvis didn't want to go. The whirlpool in his chest warned against it. But he also couldn't let Mara go alone.

The passageway swung closed behind them before the intruder even realized they were there.

#

The stairwell immediately plunged into darkness so true Alvis couldn't even see the glasses at the end of his nose. He was vaguely aware of a weak, inconsistent light below, but it seemed barely more substantial than the spark of dying ashes.

He stopped on the second step, unable to go on without a clear idea of where he was putting his feet. Thankfully, Mara did the same a mere two steps below. Her breathing shuddered. Her aura burned on high alert.

Alvis counted the seconds between each of her breaths and felt through his bag for the orb of alchemical fire he'd dared to bring along. When he withdrew it, the flickering green proved more light than enough to light their tiny well.

Mara turned back, ethereal as a scared ghost in the firelight. Her expression fell, for the barest second, into honest and breathless relief. Then, she spied something over his shoulder and climbed back up to the first of the stairs.

Alvis turned with her, casting the firelight onto the back of the secret bookcase door. It bore a lock, a rusted iron latch-bolt that slid straight into the concrete wall. Mara drove it as deep as its hole would allow and gave an extra tug for good measure before she was satisfied.

"There. That should buy some time."

Alvis frowned at her. Lock or not, no one else could have gotten through without his ring. But then, maybe this was something else she hadn't told him.

"Did you know about this?"

"Of course not." The green paint made her eyes look even darker, black as the stairwell in which they stood. "But you did."

Alvis went to bite his ring, but missed. He bit the knuckle of his finger instead. True, he'd remembered the door, but he had no idea where it led. For all he knew, they'd just looked themselves in hell.

With nowhere else to go, they descended the stairs. Mara added her phone light to that of the fire. They didn't have far to go -- only two flights -- but they also didn't know the stairs' condition, so they took it very slow.

"I've heard of this," Mara said, perhaps only to fill the stagnant, moist air. "Supposedly, the old airbase had tunnels. In case of bombs. They're meant to be filled in, but..."

She let it hang. They'd reached the base of the stairs.

The floor here was solid concrete, smooth and untouched after all these years. Barely a meter from the final step stood a doorway with no door, which opened into a dim, gray rectangular room about the same size as the archive overhead. Water dripped from the ceiling and old pipes covered the concrete walls. At the near end flickered a single bare incandescent bulb with hardly more light than a firefly.

From her bag, Nephele whimpered. Her head poked from her pocket, but she made no move to escape. She barely moved at all. If she could talk, Alvis guessed that she would beg them not to go in. Too late. They couldn't turn back now.

Mara entered first. Alvis, a step behind. They shown their lights on opposite sides to find that the room's long walls were lined with tables. One, to the right and inside the door, had been flipped onto its side. An old tarp covered half of it like a tent; what lay exposed beneath it seemed to be a nest made from torn blankets and shredded cloth. Glass shards covered the floor, crackling under their every step. The only patches that didn't hold glass held papers, ancient yellow and scattered to all corners.

The other tables were cluttered, bearing piles of twisted metal and half-formed glass that flickered slightly under the glow of a strange blue moss that covered the walls and shimmered slightly, like the decorations in the gym. Before Alvis could look too closely at the contents, he noticed the tall thing standing at the heart of the room. Made of brick and stone, its main body was a perfect cube with iron doors on every face. A smaller cube with more doors had been stacked on top, and a series of coiling pipes wound from the entire form to carry the smoke up and out. Its vents bore piles of soft, still-flickering ash.

"Is that what I think it is?"

Mara phrased it as a question, but Alvis guessed from her tone that she already knew the answer. As did he.

"An athanor." Alvis gulped against a scratchy-dry throat. "This is an alchemy lab."

In retrospect, the connection seemed obvious. The shards were broken glassware -- looking closely, Alvis could pick out bulbs and stems among their mess. The yellowed papers, ruined by water and age, must once have held notes like the journals in his bags. Even the odd moss must once have been a creation of some kind, left to grow wild in the absence of its creator.

But this place...it was a nightmare. There could be no peace here, no balance or safety. A life cultivated within these hard, dripping walls could only become twisted. Hell, an alchemist's very soul would wither in conditions like this. Nothing good could be created here. Nothing good could grow.

He knelt by the athanor, pausing a moment to pat Nephele's head for comfort before opening the iron gate. He held his hand over the softly-glowing ashes and found them to still be warm.

"Someone's been here," he called to Mara, who had drifted towards the far end of the room. The whirlpool in his chest raged on. Worse than being here, someone had been working here. In this ruined, twisted place. "We shouldn't stay."

Mara made a noise that he took to mean assent, but she didn't move from where she stood near the far door. "Look here."

Alvis closed the athanor door and went to join her, taking note of the dark hall that continued past the second door, its walls stained with more of the blue moss. When he finally turned his eye to her discovery, he gagged.

The last two tables bore less chaos than the rest of the room, but what they held instead was even worse: a collection of mix-matched jars in varying conditions and salvaged from god-knows where, each suspending a different form in foul green sludge, each at a different stage of growing flesh on to mismatched, broken copper bones.

The wires used to charge them came from a panel on the wall, probably stealing the power straight from the school. A final skeleton, "complete" but un-wired, lay on the tabletop awaiting its master's return. Under the lip of its tin-can torso, Alvis could just see the marbled, oily red of a half-formed heartstone.

Nephele wailed at the sight and dove back into her pocket, trembling so hard Alvis could feel it through the leather. He wished he could go with her. Mara clenched her fists so tight that her arms shook and her knuckles went white. Even dressed as she was, she looked ready to break someone in half.

"These are the things that attacked me."

Alvis averted his eyes, unable to look at the monsters anymore. "I know."

"Qalu's brother lives here. It was here the whole time."

Alvis tried to answer again, but before he could manage Mara's head snapped up, her eyes darting towards the dark hall. Alvis stilled and listened with her, trusting her sharp ears to have heard what he couldn't. It took focus to hear over his own staggering breaths, but once he finally caught the sound he stopped breathing altogether.

Laughter. Echoing laughter from deep in the dark tunnels beneath this school. And it was coming closer.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Mara knew that laugh. It haunted her showers and invaded her dreams.

If she'd been down here alone, she might have stormed the darkness to hunt the beast, Petrov's advice be damned. But she wasn't alone, and she couldn't, wouldn't, leave Alvis and Nephele behind.

"Hide," she hissed instead, grabbing Alvis's arm to keep them together. With nowhere else to go, they ducked under the stairs. Mara doused her flashlight. Alvis fumbled the fire orb back into his bag. Together, they held their breath, peered through the gaps in the stairs, and waited.

The laughter grew, oscillating in and out as its master breathed. Each approaching step made it clearer and clearer that the sound came not from a single source, but dozens. An entire choir's worth of voices laughed as one, as though they shared a single breath, a single brain.

Mara curled her fingers in the nearest stair's grate, unwilling to blink lest the beast, the Thing, slip past the distant black door and escape her again. Cold metal bit her joints as her aura rose to a crackling thunder, fueled by her anger and disgust.

Alvis's hand covered hers, cool and soft and soothing. He caught her eye in the faint gleam of the glowing moss and took a deep breath. Five in. Seven out. Repeat.

It was easier now to find his rhythm. Mara fell into step by the second breath and willed her heart to let go. Calm. Flicker, don't burn. Stay quiet. Stay hidden, for now. The time would come. But first. Calm.

Her aura faded from a crackle to a whisper. She caught the faintest hint of Alvis's retreating in kind before a final breath plunged them both into silence.

A moment thereafter, the creature arrived.

It came first in tiny steps, little feet on the floor, little claws in the wood. Tiny, misshapen creatures like the ones that had swarmed her room came skittering in, crawling across desks and pipes. Mara counted a dozen. Maybe more. When they didn't hold still it was hard to tell.

Among and behind them shuffled a larger beast, human-shaped and human-sized. It, unlike its creations, had a proportional frame, finely crafted with human-like shape and human-like bones, all save for its fingers. There the flesh had been torn back, the bones at their tips replaced with long knives. It scraped these along the wall, grating deep into Mara's ears.

It -- he? -- dragged its bare and blackened feet into the ruined lab. Long, knotted, rotting black hair hung from its scalp to its waist, a ruined curtain that did nothing to hide its stretched and sunken skin. Its stomach bulged and its joints were bare, which made the fact that it wore clothes -- a pair of ruined slacks held tight to the hips by a belt -- all the stranger.

It stood before the first open space on the desk and set down a dirty jar, filled to the brim with green sludge. Its minions scattered through the room, collecting pieces and twisting wires, building arms and legs, a neck and a head.

Agonizing minutes passed before they bore the pieces, one by one, to their master. As it pieced the fragments together with wire, Mara counted the mob's breaths and found that they all came at the same rate, at the time, at the same pace. The Thing barely moved, standing still with eyes on its work, not even looking up when a lone straggler brought forth a foul black stone for the heart. It was as though the little men were extensions of the big one, its limbs and eyes. Like they shared a single mind.

The skeleton complete and the heart installed, the Thing lay its new creation on the desk for another of its men to wire and crept one knife-tipped hand up to its own skull. Laying the fingers flat, it gripped a palm's worth of black hair and pulled. The scalp rolled back, exposing a hole in the copper skull. The long knives of its opposite hand reached in and plucked out a fragment of its own brain.

Alvis sealed a hand over his lips. The other covered Nephele's pocket, keeping her pinned in, though for once she did not seem eager to escape. He shook, arms wrapped as though if he pulled his coat tight enough, he would disappear into its depths and escape the horrid view.

As the Thing placed a piece of its own brain into the new monster's skull, Mara wrapped around Alvis as much as her smaller frame would allow. Hand cupped around the crown of his skull, she held both him and Nephele close, counting the seconds and willing her heart to stay. Calm. They could stay quiet. They could stay hidden. The creatures -- creature -- would soon leave, and then they could slip away and find Caden or Syd or Silena and...

A soft, mechanic buzz shattered their silence.

Mara froze, unable to think or to move or to reach for the traitorous device that continued to rumble at her hip. Her phone rang away without a care in the world, even as Nephele gasped and Alvis went stiff in her arms and a dozen, two-dozen gleaming black eyes turned to the door.

The Thing and its men moved their many heads as one and they *stared*.

#

In the next breath, it attacked.

Its many awful little limbs surged ahead with a singular shriek, bounding into the well and covering the stairs like a plague. Three lodged themselves in the gap between steps, catching their various misshapen bulges in the grate and sticking fast, only to reach through with their needle-sharp hands. Mara lurched back in time to save her eyes. She leapt from the hiding spot, dragging Alvis along even as he fumbled to get into his bag.

The little men leapt at them, tearing at their clothes and hair. One tore a hole down Alvis's front and sent Nephele flying with a screech. Mara dropped the grip on Alvis to catch her, snatching her dress from a pair of outstretched jaws. With his arms free, Alvis finally loosed one of his flash bombs and flung it down at their feet.

Though Mara covered her eyes, the crack and boom still left her head spinning and spots in place of her usual sight. She held Nephele close and barreled ahead, into the lab.

She slammed into a wall of metal, flesh, and hair. It slid back a few inches on the slick floor before digging in its heels and holding firm. Her vision cleared. There stood the thing, peering at her through its wicked mane. The teeth in its mouth were sharp as its finger-knives.

"Fire," it growled, in a voice like gargling soot. Half of the mob echoed its word, while the other half whispered another in a language she didn't know. A hand landed on her shoulder. If it pressed, the knives would drive into her skin. "You. Won't. Burn me."

And then it laughed, an awful sound that chilled her to the bone even before the mob joined in. Nephele, still clutched in her palms, shrieked with fear and tried to scramble from the dark, cold aura that poured in. The Thing dragged Mara in and pressed close with its foul breath. Its black lips were pulled back into a twisted smile.

"Mara, duck!"

With only that warning and a shuddered gasp, Mara dropped to the floor. Alvis swung his saddlebag over her head and struck the Thing in its bloated stomach. It lurched forward, and several of its minions stopped dead in their tracks or tripped over their own feet, getting tangled in a mess of limbs and shrieks.

Alvis pulled the bag back by the strap, only for the Thing to grab hold while he was overbalanced and pull. He tumbled onto one of the tables, and then the creature was on him. Mara lifted her head to find Alvis pinned, his feet scrambling for purchase even as the monster bore down.

"You..." snarled the Thing in his face. "You're dead."

Snarling, Mara shoved Nephele into her pocket and snapped the aurora scarves from her wrist. Descending on the Thing from behind, she wrapped the cloth around its neck and reared back, using her weight to drag it to the floor. It snapped at her with its teeth, catching her leg, but she barely noticed the pain. She dragged Alvis up by his coat and bolted for the open door, shouting the one word that was now on her mind.

"Run!"

#

Beyond the door lay tunnels, and in the tunnels lay black, pitch and endless. Mara could have closed her eyes and never known if it weren't for the patches of glowing moss at each corner, lighting her way.

She charged without fear, holding Nephele close and pausing in her breath only to hisses assurances to her and to Alvis that they would be safe, they would. She took corners with reckless abandon, ignoring the few half-ajar doors and trusting her longer legs to put space between her and the beast. She ran until the chattering fell behind and kept going, stopping only when she at last hit a dead-end with nowhere else to go. Water dripped here, from the roof and the walls. A crack in the stone gave way to fresh earth, pushed inward by the grasping roots of a tree.

She waited, dreading, her eyes closed. The Thing never came.

Leaning her head to the wall, she breathed a sigh of relief even as the shaking construct she carried burst into tiny tears. She patted Nephele's back, turned to ask Alvis what their next plan would be, and found herself completely alone.

Cold and wet and bleeding, she sank into the soaking wall and slid to the floor, limbs weak with the effort and shock. She listened, hoping she was wrong. Hoping that, any second now, Alvis would appear like the ghost he always seemed. He would be panting and pale but safe. They would find a way out together and escape to the safety of fresh air. He wasn't lost and in danger and she wasn't lost and alone and trapped beneath the earth, waiting for the wait to rise and drown her and...

Breathe. Breathe.

Her phone rang.

Mara swore. She tucked Nephele into her collarbone and furiously dug the offending device from her pocket. Of all the things to keep hold of in this mess. The signal wasn't even good. She had five missed calls from Caden in all this, but of course the ones that got through had to ruin everything.

"Fucking what?" she snapped, pressing the gleaming square to her ear. Stupid, she knew. She needed fucking help. But now she was crying, and she hated that. So damn weak.

Sure enough, the signal barely worked down here. Caden's high and frantic voice was cut through with static, butchering his every other word.

"--ara, than--you--safe?"

"No, dammit." She sniffled. Tears came fast now, salty and hot. They splashed Nephele even as she tried to wipe them away. "I need help. I lost Alvis."

"Alvi--not--seems--"

"Yes. Alvis. He's in trouble. I need--"

Static. Swearing again, she gripped the tree's root and dragged herself up, stretching as close to the ceiling. Caden kept shouting, though his words came in spurts, and it was all she could do to strain for a bar.

The single full sentence she caught before the signal gave out made her blood run cold.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Cold. Cold, wet, trapped, claws on his skin, claws in his face, claws at his throat, claws in his eyes...

Alvis gasped, lungs hammering against his ribs as he tried, tried to remember how to breathe. Every inhale threatened to swallow part of the awful, twisted creatures that kept him pinned, skittering across his torso and along his limbs like an insect swarm. They'd dragged him down and away from Mara as she vanished into the dark, a dozen small but heavy bodies tangling into his clothes and his hair and his limbs as they pinned him to the cold, wet floor for their master, their main self, that awful dripping thing.

Now that central creature loomed over him, a face from a nightmare, just...staring. It felt like it'd been staring for hours, its full weight seated on Alvis's ribs as the knives that were its fingers threatened to tear through cloth and coat and skin. At last it leaned close, close enough for Alvis to see every curve and broken cut in its rotted face. Its breath smelled like the digester, bloated with blood and rotting meat.

"You," it hissed. Spit the color of tar bubbled through its razor fangs. "*I killed* you."

"Killed you," echoed a little one near his ear. And then another chimed in, and then another, and another.

"Killed you."

"Killed you."

"Killed you."

A knife, rusted and nicked, raked its broken point down Alvis's face. Its edge crept close to his eye and he cringed.

"How?" whispered the creature. And then, "Why?"

Alvis couldn't have answered even if he wanted to. His throat had closed, and refused to give him any more than a rattling sob.

The creature hissed. His minions hissed. The hiss became waves and the waves became a roar as the Thing flung up its hand and bared its entire set of knives. "Tell me why!"

A second before the blades came down, there came a high scream. A tiny, white slip of a thing of a thing leapt from the darkness. Nephele, white dress rustling behind her like fairy's wings, landed right on the Thing's face and drove both of her tiny hands directly into its eyes.

The Thing yowled, grabbing for her and slicing off long strands of its own hair in the fight. Its mob of little men swarmed off Alvis, leaping at the main body and swallowing it in a mass of half-formed flesh. The collective creature snarled, snapped, and screamed as it tried to rid itself of Nephele's determined, grasping hands.

Then Mara swept in with a ringing cry of her own, dragging a tattered tarp salvaged from gods-knows where. She snagged the entire mass of half-rotting homunculi like a school of fish from a river and dragged it back, aura blazing bright and hot. Nephele slipped free in the chaos,

dropping onto Alvis's stomach and scrambling for the safety of her coat pocket. The trembling candle of her aura curled into his breast and stayed there, shaking.

Alvis lurched up from the floor in time to watch, barely, as Mara tied off the tarp in a big, messy knot and body-slammed the collective Thing into the stone wall. She whirled on Alvis, costume and hair dye a brilliant flash of color in the dark, and bodily dragged him from the floor.

"Run!" she shouted, which echoed down the dank halls in both directions.

With that, she hauled Alvis back into the dark from whence she'd come.

#

Deep in the dark, a heavy door slammed shut, pressing them both into the bare space of an abandoned closet. Mara pinned Alvis to the wall, their limbs tangled and her hand across his lips. Her fingers pressed so close to his nose made breathing hard, but it kept in the half-panicked sobs that yet threatened to shake him apart.

He felt and heard more than he saw Mara take a deep, steadying breath. She dragged it in through her teeth, held it for a long count, and then released it in a hiss that warmed the shell of his ear.

Despite the memories and fears rattling inside him, Alvis mimicked her. He turned his thoughts inward, aura swirling down a drain through his chest into his stomach and growing quiet, as hers did. Ripples and embers masked the fire and waves.

A horrid, echoing shriek -- one scream in a dozen voices -- echoed through the tunnels. Mara cringed. Her poor ears.

Feet and hands and claws skittered past them, some scraping the closet as they rushed past. One even rattled the knob. Yet, it didn't open. The collective Thing surged past, hissing and cursing. Damp echoes chased it down the thin, silent halls.

Alvis counted thirty shared breaths before Mara at last moved her hand from his mouth. Her shoulders sank but the arms stayed on him. There wasn't room enough to pull away.

"Thank you," he gasped, trembling where he stood. He tugged at his lab coat, feeling his pockets and their contents. Nephele remained safe where she was and seemed in no rush to move for once. Thank god. "We should..."

Mara hissed, pressing her arm into the soft curve of his throat. Harsh light flared in the darkness -- her phone -- and illuminated her deep scowl.

"What are you?"

Alvis's mouth went sand-dry.

Aura barely contained, Mara held the phone to Alvis's eye. The plastic bore the full-screen image of a photograph in a small black frame. It showed, in faded colors, three teenage boys wearing long dark coats, perched on the deck of a grand house with the sigil for winter carved in the door. One boy, the tallest, looked older by a few years. He had pale eyes and long dark hair. The second, younger and scowling, was stocky with broad shoulders and tanned skin. And the third, the youngest and palest, had his face.

"Alvis Norling," said Mara, freeing her hand just enough to focus the photo on the youngest boy. "Headmaster Orvar Norling's son. He lived and *died* here forty years ago."

The searing light cleared as she lowered the phone, angling the screen toward the floor. Its lingering glow under-lit her narrowed eyes and gritted teeth.

"So what does that make you?"

The closet walls and worn stone hallway could have come crashing down around them and Alvis wouldn't have noticed. Disbelief and denial made his senses numb, his limbs heavy. This was it. It was all over. There would be no explanation that could put the secrets back where they belonged.

He gulped. "I-It's not what you think--"

"Don't tell me what I think."

Alvis cringed. When the half-expected blow didn't come, he steeled his limited courage and forced out the one clear thought he could grasp: "I didn't lie."

Mara fixed him with a tight-lipped, unwavering glare. With her face a mask and her aura tamped down, she became a blank slate. No way to know what she was thinking.

She must hate him. And she had every reason.

Somewhere beyond the closed door, the Thing shrieked. Its chorus echoed from all directions, the collective horde scattered throughout the tight tunnels of its domain.

Mara at last released him. "We need to go."

Alvis stumbled, joints weak. It was only the tight closet space that kept him on his feet. Mara hoisted his bag from the ground and turned an ear toward the door, head cocked back the way they'd come. Her scowl deepened. The Thing must be between them and the stairs.

"Hold this." She thrust the bag into Alvis's arms, flipped open the top, and began to dig through his supplies. "I have an idea."

He was hardly in the position to disagree.

##

Mara's plan relied on three things: timing, speed and, terribly, trust.

She'd doused the phone light before exiting the closet, half-led, half-hauled Alvis through the oppressive black by a tight grip on his lapels, and finally settled them in a dead end that dripped with steady brine. Here she held guard while Alvis filled the wall's holes with the last of his supplies, starting with the orbs of alchemist's fire to light their way and tucking stopped vials of black powder alongside the last of his boom tubes.

This was insane, and he suspected that she knew it. They were in enemy territory, the Thing's own lair. Even if they escaped, so long as the creature survived and roamed free Mara would be in danger. The whole school could be. He understood her reasoning more than he liked, but that didn't make what they were about to do any less crazy.

He wanted to ask if she was sure, if she'd thought this through, but he no longer had that right. Besides, they hadn't the time. In the thirty seconds it took him to set their makeshift charges, they were found.

One of the little men spotted their flame the second it skittered around the corner and let out a triumphant cackling shriek. A dozen more joined, and a dozen skittering feet charged over rough concrete floors.

Mara hauled Alvis up by his shoulder and planted him bodily at her side, their matched shoulder widths blocking the hall. She kicked the first creature, sent it flying into another, and snapped, "Stand your ground."

And Alvis did, even as a dozen crackling, thunderous, burning auras assailed his senses. Creature after creature barreled into the hall, flinging themselves as canon balls of twisted metal and rotting flesh. He guarded his face with his arms and clutched the last boom tube tight in his hand, ignore the raw fear that boiled in his gut as rusted copper raked his clothes, his skin, his

hair. Mara had even less defense, her thin tights already torn to shreds. He could bare this, they could bare this. It would be less than a minute before...

A howl echoed from the far, far end of the long hall. The small creatures joined in half a second, flinging themselves from walls and ceiling and floor like massive, bulbous insects. Their identical, shared aura burst into crackling fireworks. Alvis's head swam from the sheer proximity.

Beside him, Mara's aura blazed.

"Right here, asshole!" she bellowed. "Come and get us!"

And come it did, pounding feet sprinting towards them from the dark. A too-long arm flung over its head, knife-fingers striking sparks off the ceiling. It yowled as it charged, wordless, even as its smaller selves cackled, "Die die die die DIE!"

The Thing tore through, trampling its extensions. Its eyes caught the light of the alchemist's fire and seemed to blaze white-hot behind its gnarled curtain of hair.

At the last second, Mara said, "Now!"

And in the same breath, she and Alvis both dove to the ground, flinging themselves under the Thing's flailing arms.

Alvis hit cement elbows-first and rolled, a gangly mass of clumsy limbs compared to Mara's tight, controlled somersault. He landed in a sprawled mess right atop one of the constructs, but nonetheless managed to twist around at the last second and do exactly what he needed to: fling his very last boom tube at the alchemist's fire in the back wall.

Glass shattered, the slightest tiny chink swallowed by a thunderous BANG! and the cacophony of explosions that followed. The Thing, caught in mid-turn trying to follow their sudden dodge, was struck from behind and flung forward. It crashed into the cement face-first,

flinging a messy chunk of gray matter from the hole in its skull. Its extensions were likewise bowled over, flung about by the second explosion, and the third, and the fourth.

The glowing green orb in the center shattered last, spewing concentrated green fire in a blast close enough to singe Alvis's hair. Instincts bellowed at him to stay down, to cover his head until this was over, but he couldn't, couldn't, not here.

He scrambled backwards, away from the Thing's grasping knife-blades, and lurched to his feet. The last bit of light gave him a glimpse of Mara, struggling to stand, her hands clutched over her ears. She screamed, screamed, but Alvis couldn't hear her over the crash of crumbling stone as the weak walls gave way. The Thing, trapped on the floor among crumbling debris, howled in terror and rage.

Alvis rushed to Mara, grasping her arm just as the far wall collapsed and the ocean rushed in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

As the water and dark rushed in, Mara thought, ridiculously, of her father.

If she'd followed his plan, done what he asked and been what he wanted, she would be safe at home right now, in their village by the river, sitting down to dinner with her mother and sister, placing bets with her uncle about when the first snow would set in. Her father would be home, at the head of the table, and he'd want to hear all about her latest school projects and how well she was doing on practice exams for the PSATs.

Instead, they'd spent the last year barely speaking as she pulled away and forged her own path, and now that path led her here, to the cold maw of saltwater and earth.

It swallowed her whole, sending her world into a tailspin. Head over heels, pounded by rock fragments and flailing tiny men, she managed a final gasp of air before it all disappeared and she was left, trapped in the dark with no sense of up or down or safety.

Her head struck something hard and she knew, as her senses swarm: she would drown here. She was trapped and lost and she would drown, just like the last time. Just like her brother.

Webbed fingers grasped at her clothes, her limbs and her throat. She pulled against them, and it was only then that she realized they were all ghosts, all except the pair that held her from the front, under the arms and pulling up, up.

She forced her eyes open. Alvis. He had her, and they were in open water, murky and black but away from the walls and the caves and the hallway. His bag and all its contents -- his father's notes, the journal -- sank into the darkness behind them, but he barely seemed to care. She could feel a squirming lump in her pocket -- Nephele, poor Nephele, clinging for dear life -- and there, in this distance, was a light. A mix of orange and white. Salvation.

Alvis looked down at her, his glasses long gone, pale hair spread around him like a halo. He pulled her up under the arms and gave her a push, and it was only then that she realized he wasn't free. A hand grasped his leg from the rubble. No, a wire. Or... a rope?

Something. Something had him, was holding him down. He would drown here. She had to help.

But before she could, a hand grasped her by the back of her dress and hauled her up and away.

#

She came up like a drowned rat; coughing, sputtering, and flailing. The grasping hand dragged her up and tossed her to a waiting arm, which slammed her in the stomach to force out the swallowed brine. Winded and gasping, she folded around the iron limb as it hauled her back, her hands grasping beneath the waves. She couldn't leave, she couldn't, it had him, didn't they understand?

Next thing she knew, her savior tossed her bodily from the Sound and onto dry land, where other hands waited to drag her up and into the grass. Mara ended up on hands and knees, spraying saltwater into too-green grass. Nephele slipped from her pocket. She lay terribly still for a moment, hidden in shadows and plants, then jerked back to consciousness and shook herself out like a sparrow in a birdbath.

A hand, familiar and soft, came to rest on Mara's back. "That's the way, dear. Just keep breathing."

Atigtalik. Elsa. A sight for sorest eyes. Mara could have cried, and almost did when she realized that Caden knelt at her opposite side. He held back her bangs and whispered soothing words, just soft enough not to hide the distant sounds of Petrov and Syd shooping other students away.

The sheer relief of being out and being safe ran dry when Caden collected Nephele from the grass and Mara remembered. "Alvis," she gasped. "Where's Alvis?"

Her answer came in a loud splash as her rescuer tossed the pale-haired, dark-cloaked form up and onto the half-collapsed shore. The diver himself -- Alvis's master -- shortly followed, hauling himself from the Sound like a drowned bear.

Alvis lay perfectly still, eyes closed, form limp without movement or breath. Mara clawed at his coat, dragged him more firmly onto the shore, and desperately searched his neck for a pulse. She couldn't find it. No. He couldn't be dead. Not because of her, no, no.

Before she could do anything more, the bear-man -- the alchemist, Alvis's teacher, his uchitel' -- grasped Mara by the back of her dress and tossed her out of the way. He rolled Alvis onto his side and struck him hard across the back again and again.

Mara nearly went for his eyes, only for Caden to hold her back just before Alvis burst back to consciousness with a violent cough. Saltwater sprayed from his mouth and nose, coming all the more fiercely with the next few hard slaps from his teacher. Soon, the pounding stopped and his breathing gradually became more natural. His teacher, the bear, cast a brief glance in Mara's direction before unceremoniously descending again into the roiling waters of the Latea Sound.

Once he'd gone, Mara flung herself at Alvis -- not-Alvis? Oh fuck it, whatever -- and wrapped her arms around him from behind. She held his head to her shoulder and listened to him breathe, right by her ear. Here. Safe. Alive. Whatever and whoever else he was, he was alive.

It took him a moment and a few more coughs before he could return the affection, covering her arm with his own. The other kept him propped up, sprawled as he was across the mix of rubble and grass. "You okay?"

Mara nodded. She didn't have the voice for much more.

"Nephele?"

"Here," said Caden. He had the little jar-fairy wrapped up in a washcloth, shivering but safe.

"Oh. Good." Alvis took his first deep, steady breath and sagged against Mara's hold. After a minute or so, she forced herself out of the moment and lifted her head to check them both for wounds.

Though the black coat and dark pants covered a lot, the blood that covered them was still clear. It stained the grass and her arm, most likely from his hands, and left a trail back to the water that glistened in the sheer orange lamplight. She was only barely hurt -- scraped and scratched and bruised, her head aching from its blow -- while his left leg had been mangled, the

ankle twisted a full ninety degrees from its proper place. The break continued almost to the knee, and only the tattered remains of his pants leg covered what could only be a gruesome scene. Just looking at it made Mara feel sick.

"God," she swore. "Doesn't that hurt?"

He stiffened again. Gulped. His breath shook in her ear. "Not...really."

Another splash heralded the return of his teacher, about twenty feet down the shore, who hauled a third broken and mangled form onto the grass before again returning to dry land. The figure he'd brought out had long, matted hair and knives on its fingers. This time, instead of resuscitating, he yanked one of the largest knives free and drove it deep into the creature's chest.

The alchemist then covered the (dead?) thing with his coat and made his way back to them in that strange, uneven gait. Mara held Alvis all the tighter, baring her teeth at the man with a hiss. He frowned at her, exchanged a glance and a nod with Elsa, and knelt at Alvis's side.

Rough, stubby fingers prodded at the mangled leg. Alvis didn't even wince. His teacher said something in Russian and he replied. They went back and forth twice more in short bursts, then the man drew a short saw from the collection of tools on his belt.

As he lowered it to Alvis's leg, Mara gave a shout of disgust. "The *hell* are you doing?!"

"Mara, it's okay--"

She seized the man's wrist, yanking it up before the blade could sink into Alvis's knee. She expected a fight, but the man only gave her a look somewhere between pity, disgust, and surprise.

"This needs to be done."

"The flying hell it does! Elsa--"

But the nurse kept her distance, the knuckles of one hand pressed to her pursed lips. It was only then that Mara recognized the creature on her shoulder, the white raven with its fine tail-feathers stretched nearly to Elsa's waist. The woman's gaze remained locked on the teacher, the alchemist, and they seemed almost to be communicating without words. The man still didn't fight Mara's hold.

Alvis tugged at Mara's sleeve. With a few pulls and a nudge at her cheek, he forced her to look at him and lifted his palm close to her face.

"Mara," he said, too soft and too gentle. "Look."

Somewhere between the rocks and the shore, his palm had been sliced open all the way to the wrist. Maybe the Thing did it, or maybe the rocks. Didn't matter. It looked bad and deep, a twisted mess of blood and torn skin and -- god, was that meat? Raw muscle, ground up like beef? Mara tried to turn, but before she could Alvis used his other thumb to push the shredded skin aside and she saw.

Beneath the skin and muscle and blood lay the gleaming, tarnished green of copper bones.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Sickbay, as Mara called it, smelled of vomit and anti-bacterial soap.

Alvis wrinkled his nose, wondering idly how his master could stand it -- his nose could be so sensitive. Yet here he stood, applying the last of the healing salve to the stub that had been Alvis's left knee and wrapping it in gauze without so much as wrinkled nose.

Alvis made a point of keeping his gaze straight ahead and not glancing right at the sheet-covered operating cart that held the remains of everything that had previously been below the knee. This was not the first time he'd had to replace a part, but broken fingers and burnt ears were very different than an entire leg, if only because it took longer -- nearly a solid hour -- to remove. It also didn't much resembled a leg anymore so much as a twisted mess of copper and meat, but... still.

They'd worked for most of the hour in silence, punctured only by whispered questions in their mother tongue as Alvis quietly owned up to the events of the last few weeks. Only when his

master tied off the last bandage and to wash his hands in the sink did he dare to breach the more pressing issues that nagged him.

"Was anyone hurt?" He hadn't seen much of the destruction caused by the collapsing tunnel, but then they'd been hurried in here before he'd quite gotten the chance to look around.

Darius shrugged, shutting off the water. "Only you," he said. "There was only grass in that place. It's the only reason you could breach the wall. Beyond that, the damage will not be your concern."

Alvis breathed a private, relieved sigh. He couldn't bare to be responsible for anyone else's pain.

"Have you been hunting that creature?"

"These past few days, yes. Solomon and I had been told that the tunnels were long sealed. That's why it has taken so long to find the creature's nest." The man paused then to gather his thoughts, reaching out to scratch Faigel -- who perched on the sink beside him -- on the neck just behind her ear. "There will be an investigation of this, I am certain. From the Order, and beyond."

Alvis gulped. Order alchemists, coming here, was the one thing they'd always feared.

"Am I safe?"

"You will be."

A knock sounded at the exam room door. There stood Mara, now dressed in her normal clothes, peering through cross-hatched window glass with narrowed, dark eyes locked on Darius. His teacher wrapped up the last of his equipment, set it and Faigel on the operating cart, and waved Mara in.

"We will speak later," he said to Alvis, and stepped out, taking the remains with him.

Mara turned her head to follow the retreat. Her pained expression told Alvis that she knew exactly what the cart contained.

Once the door closed again, she turned back to face him. "Does it really not hurt?"

Alvis shrugged, giving himself a moment to switch mental gears back to English. "Not at all."

Constructs could not feel physical pain. Sometimes, he half-imagined he could remember the sensation. It came in dreams and flashbacks. But that was all, and even then it seemed distant and unreal.

Nephele chose that moment to emerge from Mara's coat pocket, clambering up the sleeve to her shoulder and giving 'Papa' a quick kiss on the cheek before leaping across into Alvis's hands. Alvis cradled his creation and let her peck him repeatedly on the cheek. They were safe, they were all alive, and the Thing that had threatened them was dead. That put everything right in the world.

Mara took a deep breath. Her aura flickered, like a candle or star. Hurt and tired, but not angry. Which meant she wasn't bothering with a mask.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Alvis looked at his feet. Foot. Changed his glance to the floor.

He would tell her the truth. It was only fair.

"I was afraid," he said, stroking Nephele's hair. "Of you, at first. And then..."

The thing he felt now was hard to put into words, even harder than attempting to describe his memories of pain. There were a million things he could have said and none of them felt completely right, but the closest is what finally made it out.

"I liked the way you looked at me. I didn't want that to change. Or end."

Mara studied him. The mask extended now to her aura, which remained at a low burn. He bit his lip and kept his gaze lowered, waiting for her to walk out of the room and out of his life -- their lives -- forever.

Instead, she took the hand that didn't hold Nephele and gave it a squeeze.

There came another knock on the door, shortly followed by the kind nurse -- Mrs. Elsa -- sticking her head in the room.

"Pardon the interruption," she said. "But Solomon is asking for both of you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Two exam rooms over from where Alvis had lost his leg, there lay a body. Laid out flat, it was covered in a plastic tarp that bore only the slightest remnants of the brief but gruesome autopsy that had occurred. On the table beside it rested the creature's head, removed from its spine and wrapped in a trash bag, and beside that lay a silver tray in which sat a twisted, oily black rock the size of a fist. This, apparently, was the heart of the Mount Vilna thing.

Mara took this all in with a glance through the window as she followed Mrs. Elsa down the hall. For lack of a proper wheelchair, the nurse had placed Alvis on one of the rolling chairs from her desk, which she pushed ahead of them as they walked through the otherwise empty and silent sickbay.

Technically speaking, Mara didn't think she was meant to be on her feet either, not after the head-blow she'd taken. But she was too hyped up to be bedridden again, especially between the lingering adrenaline of their "adventure" and the odd pink-tasting tincture that Petrov had

forced down her throat. They'd given up trying to contain her an hour ago, and that was probably for the best.

The man in question was waiting for them in the main ward, well away from the door and any prying eyes that might be stalking the grounds despite the curfew. He sat in a chair next to what would be Mara's bed; she had to be 'observed' tonight, in case of concussion. The photograph from his desk of three young boys, the one Syd had sent her in the midst of the chaos, sat on the bedside table.

The other bed was currently occupied by Caden and Syd, still in their costumes and sitting close together like a single bunch of over-strained nerves. Alvis's teacher, Darius, leaned against a nearby wall. Silena, who had come by to bring Mara her real clothes and confess to her part in allowing them into the library, was nowhere to be seen.

Mrs. Elsa left Alvis's chair beside the empty bed, insisted that Mara take her seat on the mattress, and went to join her husband. Petrov seemed more strained than ever before, as though this night had aged him twenty years, but when Elsa placed her hand on his shoulder it lifted a bit of the weight. He covered it with his own and turned his head to kiss her knuckles, gathering his thoughts for a moment longer before he at last decided to begin.

"When Orvar Norling was made headmaster," he said, gesturing to the photo in his frame. "He brought along his three apprentices: Darius, myself, and Alvis. Our Alvis."

"Viska," said Darius. It took Mara a moment to realize that the word was a name.

"Yes. His biological son." Petrov sat back in his chair, running fingers down the length of his beard and along the underside of his chin. "As a teacher, Orvar was perhaps not the kindest man."

Darius spat. "Speak plainly, Sol. He was a bastard." His action earned him a glare from Mrs. Elsa, and he at least had the decency to look sheepish before the memories once more hardened his expression. "He had no students, truly. Only means to an end. It was the same for the school."

Petrov sighed. "I know. And I knew. I should have done more."

"You were hardly to blame."

"I was the eldest. And his assistant."

"You were a boy." Darius's last hard snap closed the book on the argument, no matter what Petrov thought. He turned his cold gaze on the gathered group, settling on each of the students one by one.

For the first time, it occurred to Mara that the man might not be scowling at all. The scar twisted his face to odd angles, especially around the cheek. Now that she stood close and could hear the low rumble of his quintessence, she started to think that, maybe, the look in his eyes was more fear than fury.

"The one thing he cared for, the one creature he loved, was Viska." The gaze landed on Alvis and shattered, his anger splintered to reveal an old pain underneath. "And god help me, I loved him too. We three were as brothers."

Petrov nodded, the faintest hint of a smile on his lips. "Vis was a sweet boy. And kind." He sighed again. "We were never officially enrolled here, but then neither were the experiments. When Vis died--"

"Was murdered."

The word hung like a body. Petrov took a deep, steadying breath and seemed to lean into Elsa's support.

"We found him in the library," he continued softly. "His notes were missing, and his field kit. Their theft was always the suspected motive." His pale eyes darted momentarily towards the exam room where the Thing's body lay broken. "That creature must have seen what happened to the other experiments. It knew it would die without the improvements that Orvar would not provide."

"So it murdered a child to extend its own life."

Petrov closed his eyes. "He was fifteen."

Silence fell as the two men gathered their respective thoughts. Mara took the opportunity to observe her friends, as they'd all seemed to agree against interruptions. Syd was holding Caden's hand. Alvis cradled Nephele and look a bit like he wanted to run away.

After a moment, Petrov again found the peace of mind to speak, stronger and more confident than before. "Orvar had the experiments purged after that, to avoid detection during the investigation. And, I suppose, for a sense of revenge." He took his glasses off and rubbed them with his shirt, apparently just to give his hands something to do. "It's what came after that I'm unclear about. He ran us out of the old house..."

"And two months later, he was dead." Darius folded his arms across his chest. "You remember where we found him?"

"At the bottom of a cliff. Alongside a dead homunculus."

"We always assumed that to be the murderer. Clearly, we were mistook." "The school's investigation kept him from the tunnels and away from most of his research. With the students being sent home, he must have known it was only a matter of time before the entire operation was either shut down or exposed."

"It is therefore my belief that he killed himself when he was unable to accomplish what he wished."

"And what was that?" asked Mara, though she suspected she already knew.

"To bring his son back to life."

Unbidden, her eyes again slid to Alvis. He'd gone oddly still, almost doll-like, staring straight ahead with blank and glassy eyes. How had she not noticed before, these odd habits? No human could sit that still.

Petrov stroked his beard again, watching his old friend out of the corner of his eye. "So." He nodded to Alvis. "What's his story?"

Mara bristled in Alvis's defense. "He's right here."

"Yes," said Darius with a sigh. "But this something he would not remember." To Solomon, he said, "When I came home, I found him in the basement."

"Darius, that was six years ago."

"I know. And by the oath to my Order I should have destroyed him on the spot."

Panic seized Mara's heart. She sat up straight and her quintessence must have flared, because Nephele gave a soft yelp and tried to hide behind Alvis's thumbs.

The flare faded a bit once she got a better look at Darius. The sorrow in his eyes was unmistakable now. "But I could not. Nor could I leave him. Not with that face."

Alvis finally moved, but only to look away. That was apparently not the news he'd been hoping for.

A second silence fell, more awkward than the first. Finally, Petrov returned the glasses to his face. "Well, there you have it. I promised you answers. Will that suffice for the evening?"

To Mara's surprise, it was Caden who nodded. "Thank you. We've got a lot to think about."

Mrs. Elsa cleared her throat. "Thinking can wait. Tonight, you all need sleep."

She shooed Syd and Caden out first, barely giving them time for a 'good night' before herding them off to their dorm. Mara began to lie down, if only to make the woman stop fretting, but realized with a jolt that Petrov had begun to wheel Alvis out the door.

She caught his sleeve and glared at the teachers. Darius in particular. "You're not taking him."

"Mara," said Solomon, "he can't stay here. Not while his leg's still exposed. It's too dangerous. If someone else sees the bone..."

Mara's gaze darted from the bandaged hands to the space she'd been avoiding that used to be his leg. Alvis turned his hand to take hers and offered a small smile. "I'll be okay. I'm used to hiding."

"Promise to bring him back."

There wasn't a second's hesitation. "I promise."

Mara blinked. She had not been expecting that.

It was Mrs. Elsa who finally stepped in to pry their hands away. "Everything will be fine now," she said, warmly patting Mara's palm. "But for now, you need to rest. Okay?"

As she spoke, she pressed her fingers against Mara's pulse and filled her ears with a soothing, distant sound. Waves on the shore. Wind off the sea. The cool, crisp bite of fresh water.

In the back of her mind, Mara knew this had to be some alchemical trick, like what Darius had used that day in the woods. But in the moment, when her head still ached and her heart burned, she found that the brush of cool aura against her own felt...good. It reminded her of Alvis's meditation, even as the boy said his goodbyes and was helped out the door by the two masters. She might worry in the morning, but for now she felt only faith that everything would work out all right in the end.

At peace for the first time in weeks, she lay down in the bed fully clothed and drifted asleep to the sound of waves.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Outside, Alvis waited on the steps of sickbay as his teacher and Faigel went to the parking lot to retrieve his truck. This left him alone for the first time with Petrov -- Solomon -- who stood on the sidewalk with his hands in his pockets, trying and failing not to look like he was watching Alvis out of the corner of his eye.

Alvis watched him back, trying to reconcile the man before him with his vague dreams of a clean-shaven and brilliant big brother. He knew the visions didn't belong to him any more than the occasional, impartial half-mention of his name in his father's notes. Yet, he couldn't help curiosity. In another life, another, maybe they could really be...

"Did you name yourself?" Solomon asked suddenly. Apparently, he'd been deep in thoughts of his own.

"Yes."

"How?"

Alvis chewed the inside of his cheek, which was a habit he really needed to stop before he bit through it again. He knew, of course, as all alchemists would, that growing a homunculi or any construct using the genetics from a single source was not the same as reproducing the creature in full. A genetic duplicate, even one made of metal and tincture with a heart of stone, was functionally an identical twin. That should have been the case with him, but there were...extenuating circumstances.

"The master--*Darius* said that father preserved my original's brain. He...grew mine around pieces of it, in the attempt to bring him back."

As it always did, the thought made something in his head...itch. He thought that was the right word, but wasn't entirely sure because his skin didn't itch any more than it felt pain. Neither he nor his master had found an explanation for the feeling, aside perhaps for his quintessence responding to emotion.

He tapped his temple a few times and the itch gradually faded. That didn't always work, but it was nice when it did.

"I get flashes sometimes, because of it," he continued. "Memories. Odd dreams. Things like that."

Color drained from Petrov's face, leaving him a sick and clammy pallor.

"My god," said the man, dragging a hand down his face and beard. "I am...so sorry. That he did that to you."

Alvis shrugged. "I'm okay." And then, because he knew that sounded too simple, too dismissive: "I know he did wrong. That his actions were evil. But...they're the reason I'm here. They're why I'm me."

An old fear pulled at the base of his spine. He looked up at Petrov, needing to see the answer on his face to be sure. "Does... Does that make me wrong, too?"

The man's gaze softened, growing warm and kind. In that moment, Alvis could understand why Mara decided to trust him.

"No," he said as the truck pulled up to the curb. "Not at all."

#

It was well after midnight now, and the old dirt road that led back to their bridge was unlit from the moment they turned off the pavement. Alvis and his master, Nephele and Faigel all rode in silence, which made the trip seem long though it couldn't have been more than ten minutes between one point and the next. From the passenger seat, Alvis watched his master's face in the headlights' glare. The man kept his focus on the road and their path, solid and sturdy as the earth. He was thinking, and deeply. But his face betrayed nothing.

They came to their bridge, the makeshift gate still wide-open as Alvis had left it. Darius steered the truck to its usual place. Put it in park, turned off the engine and the lights. But he made no move to leave the cab.

They sat for a moment in silence and darkness, each perhaps unpacking his thoughts of the day. Even if Alvis could leave with only one leg, he wouldn't. There was something bubbling under the surface, something his teacher needed to say.

He did not have to wait long.

"You are not Viska."

"I know."

"You should not have to be."

"I know."

"It is hard to remember, sometimes." The master sighed, flexing his fingers against the steering wheel. "I have been...unfair to you, I think. Too harsh, at times. Too cruel."

Alvis looked down at his bandaged hands. "You were worried. And scared."

"That is no excuse." Darius turned to him at last, a move Alvis felt more than he saw in the dark. "I will not be what that man made me. And neither will you."

"What did you call the...the other me? Viska?"

Darius nodded. "An old nickname."

"Do you think...you could call me Alvis, instead?"

"I will try."

"Am I much like him?"

That, at last, made Darius smile. "In some ways. In others, not so much." He reached across the dash and, in an awkward display of affection, ruffled Alvis's hair. "It is good. No science can bring back the dead. It was foolish for any to try."

He sat back in his seat, his guard slipping for once into something relaxed. Alvis hadn't seen his master relax in years.

"You have seemed different lately. More..."

"Alive?"

Darius nodded. His head tilted back in the direction of the school. "Is it because of them?"

"I think so." He hesitated, but tempered his courage and forged forward. Whatever spell they were under here, he needed to make the most of it. "I like them. I like being around them, with people. They make me feel...human."

His teacher's gaze softened like clay in a hard rain. It lifted years from his gnarled features until, for a moment, Alvis could almost see the boy from the photo.

As though she sensed that the danger had passed, Nephele chose this moment to emerge from her pocket in Alvis's coat. She blinked up at the pair and, when she wasn't immediately shooed back into her hole, crawled out onto the lapel and slid into Alvis's hand.

Alvis chuckled, shifting his creation into his palm and offering her up to his master. "Her name's Nephele."

With gentleness, his master lifted the jar fairy to the light of the moon. She seemed to see this as the moment to show off and leaned back, stretching her arms and curving her spine as she basked in the silvery light.

"She is beautiful."

Alvis beamed with pride. "I couldn't have made her without Mara."

Darius brought Nephele back down, holding her as he might a baby rabbit as he absently stroked her head with one finger. Nephele cooed and Alvis couldn't help but smile.

"I believe," said his master, as they at last moved to exit the cab. "That it may be time for a change."

CHAPTER THIRTY

Though the door to Mara's dorm stood open, Syd had the decency to knock on the frame before sticking his head inside. "Morning ladies. You ready to go?"

Silena, sitting cross-legged on her bed with a book as usual, gave him an odd look from behind her curtain of hair. "Why are you asking me?"

Mara laughed and felt genuinely easy about it for once. After three days of chaos, bed rest, and canceled classes, during which the school had been swarmed with government safety agents and reporters from as far as Seattle, things were finally starting to return to normal. Ish.

She ran her fingers along the window glass, which was chilled now with the touch of oncoming winter, and snatched up her coat to compensate. "Give me a sec," she said, swinging it onto her shoulders and enjoying the familiar rattle of pins. They'd be a constant for the next five months or so, helping to drown out everything else that filled her ears. She grabbed her bag.

"Right, all set."

To her surprise, Syd instead stepped into the room and pointedly closed the door behind him, which drew a second confused look from Silena. He leaned against the wood -- which was still shiny and new from being replaced two days before -- and slid steady hands into the pockets of his hoodie.

"Before we go, there's something I've been meaning to tell you."

Mara looked to Silena, who looked back with an arched brow. Syd half-raised his hands while still in his pockets, giving an exaggerated shrug.

"Relax, it's not a big deal. Well, it's kind of a big deal. A secret kinda big deal. But it's not a big big deal. It's just." He sighed. His quintessence echoed the sound. "After what happened with Al, I decided...I wanted this on my terms, y'know?"

Mara didn't know. She'd lost track of the conversation completely. But, Syd's aura didn't sound too bad, certainly not compared to the storm it'd been in Qalu's cave. So she tried to mimic his casual pose without the wall and waited for his terms to come.

He took the time for a few deep breaths, then ran both hands through his hair until the coils stood on end. "So. Yeah. Here it goes."

Down came the zipper on his hoodie, and before Mara could quite register that he wasn't wearing a shirt under it (wasn't he cold?) his eye was drawn up, past the pudge of his stomach and the curve of his hip, to the black fabric wrapped around his chest and shoulders. It looks almost like a sport's bra, but too tight. Too flat.

Mara's mind went blank, white noise peppered with snippets of things she'd read online or in the news but never thought about too hard. What comes out, eventually, is:

"You're a girl?"

Groaning, Silena pressed her face into her hand.

Syd just chuckled, though for him it sounded oddly forced. "I've got the, ah. Feminine-standard specs, technically speaking. But up here," he tapped his temple, "That's all dude. Always has been."

And Mara...didn't know what to say to that. Part of her felt like this should be a bigger deal, and tiny logical part of her knew that it must be a bigger deal for Sydney. But compared to everything else in this crazy two weeks, she genuinely wasn't certain what she was meant to think or say about this.

A silence stretched between them, going from ten to thirty seconds before Syd, unconsciously, began to fidget.

"This isn't too weird, right? I mean, Cay already knew so. I just figured..."

"Ah, no!" Mara waved her hands, confusion turning to panic turning to the sneaking suspicion that she was about to screw up and potentially hurt a friend in the process. "It isn't. Weird. I mean, you're not..."

God, she sounded like Alvis. Deep breath, deep breath...

"It's not weird. Just...surprised me, that's all." She took a moment to gather her thoughts and started again. "I think I'm about done with surprises."

Syd relaxed, tension oozing from his shoulders as he quickly re-did the zipper. "You and me both." He grinned and reached back to re-open the door. "C'mon. Petrov wants to talk before we eat."

#

Outside Petrov's office, Mara and Syd ran into -- of all people -- Principal Faulkner.

The man had clearly seen better days, no doubt thanks to what must have been a very long week of reassuring reporters that school grounds were definitely safe and that classes would continue despite half a classroom being lost to the sea. His usual neat hair had been allowed to grow shaggy and all his seams were out of line, right up to the tie which hung rumpled and twisted from the amount of times he'd yanked it out of sheer nerves.

Mara suspected that he'd been trying, once again, to pin the blame on her, only to be thwarted by logic and the structural damage reports. His aura practically hissed at her as they came close, and he stopped dead to regard her with tight-lipped disapproval.

"Ms. Edenshaw."

Mara inclined her head. "Sir."

He stood between them and Petrov's door, leaving her little option but to stand by and wait. Faulker held her gaze, perhaps expecting to catch a flicker of deceit if he stared long enough without blinking. All he got was Syd, who continued to hover near Mara's shoulder and eventually made a strangled, awkward noise in the depths of his throat that made Mara crack into giggles.

Faulkner's nostrils and aura flared, but he said nothing. He turned a perfect ninety degrees on his heels and marched away, as ramrod straight as ever. Syd waited until he was around the corner to stick his tongue out at his back. "And good riddance."

Inside, Caden was already waiting for them by the coffee maker with a couple of brews in hand. That came as no surprise, unlike the shock of blond hair and dark coat occupying the chair in front.

Syd's eyes lit up immediately. "Al! Hey, man!"

Alvis smiled at them, seeming oddly small for his height in the leather chair. The shirt he wore was too large, giving him extra sleeves in which to hide his bandaged hands, and the jarring empty space lingered where his left pants leg had been tied off at the knee. But past that he looked hale and healthy, like he'd gotten his first good night's rest in years.

Mara couldn't help herself. She ducked in to give him a hug. "What're you doing here?"

Petrov held up a digital camera. "Just taking a picture for the student file."

The words took a moment to register, and a moment longer to clock in as real. When they finally did, Syd beat Mara to voicing their shared thoughts. "No. Way."

"Yes, way," said Petrov, in the cringe-worthy manner of dads. He chuckled when all the teenagers in the room smothered various groans and settled behind his desk, adding the camera to the various files and mess that currently occupied it.

Darius, who was sulking in the corner by the window, at least had the decency to look embarrassed for him. "It will not be happening right away."

"Certainly not," said Petrov, all smiles and light like a mother hen with a full nest. He laced his fingers and attempted to address the group again in a manner resembling seriousness, though he didn't bother trying to wipe away the smile. "It takes a bit of time, as you might imagine, to grow a new leg, and coming in at the end of the semester would only raise questions. So we'll wait until the holidays, and after that..."

He shrugged, his aura whispering with a summer breeze. Mara frowned, studying Alvis and sneaking the occasional quick glance to Darius. The sullen master's face and aura remained impassive as ever.

"Is it really okay?"

"It should be." Alvis bit his lip, offering the briefest flash of silver teeth, and tugged at his over-long sleeves. "I'm better with you, with people. So, this is a way to keep that going." He took a steadying breath and looked back up with a smile. "Besides, it'll make the rest of it easier too."

Mara blinked. "Rest of it?"

"Your training," said Darius. When she snapped her head in his direction, he inclined his own in the slightest and most permissive of bows. "If you would like it."

"I did offer," said Petrov, chuckling under his breath. "It's not like any of you can unlearn what you've seen. And Mara, you certainly can't un-Awaken. It's for the best then that you at least learn the basics -- from a master this time." He quirked an eyebrow at Alvis, who ducked, but there was no accusation in his tone. "Again though, it will be best to wait until after your exams. Which means the new semester could be a fresh start for us all. If you're interested."

Mara looked to Caden. He watched her over his glasses, breath held with the anticipation of wanting to know. She looked to Syd, who nearly unscrewed the bottom from his mug until Caden took it from his hands.

She looked to Alvis, shoulders tense and hands shaking, pale eyes hesitantly alight with hope.

She grinned.

"Let's do it."